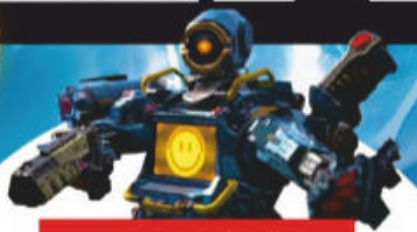


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“INEXPERIENCED DEVELOPERS CHANGED ONLINE GAMING”



This month we're celebrating two fantasy institutions. There's the grimdark excess of Warhammer, courtesy of our exclusive reveal of *Vermintide II*'s first expansion, *Winds of Magic*. *Vermintide II* earned Best Co-op in our Game of the Year awards, and for good reason. Now developer Fatshark has some exciting ideas for its continued life.

PHIL SAVAGE

Specialist in
Lore of Deadlines

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@Octaeder

This month
Managed to get in and out of a Scandinavian country without being forced to eat fermented herring.

Elsewhere, Steven Messner visited Daybreak Studios to celebrate the 20th anniversary of a PC gaming legend. In our massive *EverQuest* feature, we discover how a group of inexperienced developers changed online gaming forever – mostly by hiding away and hoping Sony management wouldn't find them!

Phil Savage

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The PC Gamer team



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@stevenmessner

This month
Wrote our *EverQuest* feature and is working on next issue's *Anthem* review. #Pray4Steven



ANDY KELLY
Specialist in
Lore of Twitter

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@ultrabright

This month
Took a brief break from the internet in order to talk to the creator of a fake internet.



PHILIPPA WARR
Specialist in
Lore of Confusion

This month
Drew on thousands of hours of *Dota 2* experience to play a mod in which a multidimensional donkey moves the chesses.



JAMES DAVENPORT
Specialist in
Lore of Guns

Twitter
@my_beards

This month
Our former *Fortnite* correspondent was lost to *Apex Legends*. Was last seen in Skull Town.

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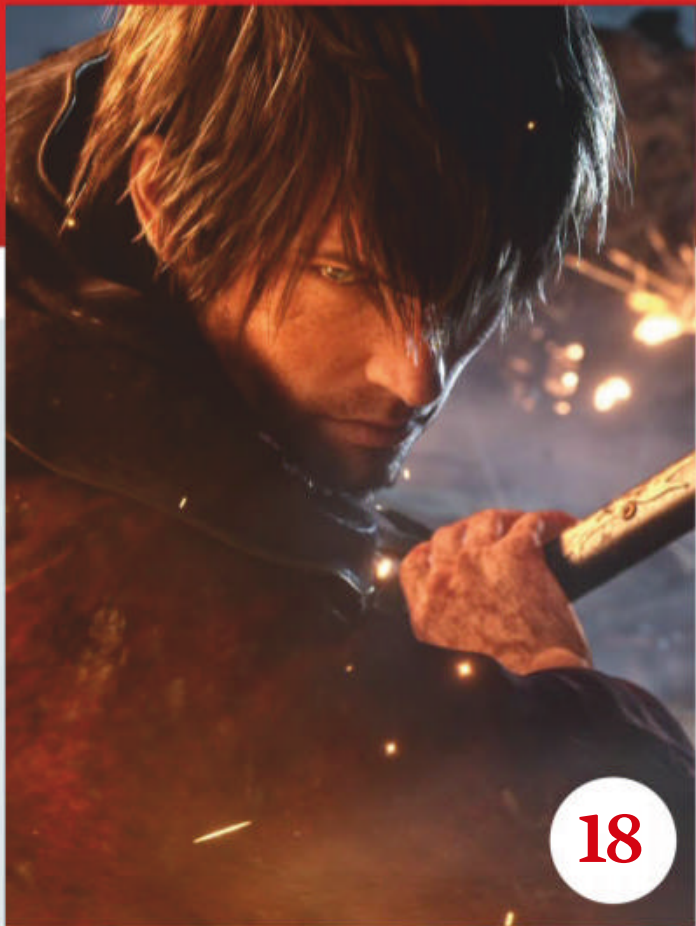
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MONITOR

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Activision continues to rely on *Call of Duty*'s success.

NO VISION

In a year of “record results”, **ACTIVISION** lays off 800 employees

On February 12, Activision hosted an earnings call in which CEO Bobby Kotick announced “record results”. On the same call, president Codd Johnson announced that approximately 8% of the company’s staff, around 800 people, were being laid off.

That’s because despite the record, Activision had failed to meet Wall Street’s expectations. “While we had record performance in 2018, it didn’t quite live up to our expectations,” said Kotick – a sentence that might make you wonder if capitalism is broken.

“Our current outlook for 2019 falls below what is possible in an industry filled with growth opportunities,” Kotick continued.

All companies restructure, but the scale of the layoffs, and the callousness of their announcement, felt particularly brutal. And the conditions that led to 800

people being laid off were created by Activision’s management. They are ultimately responsible for the fact that, in 2018, Activision released just one *Call of Duty* and two remasters of late-’90s 3D platformers, and who seemingly aren’t interested in greenlighting new games for their

IN 2018, ACTIVISION RELEASED JUST ONE CALL OF DUTY AND TWO REMASTERS

support staff to support. But they are not the ones who are suffering.

Anecdotally I’ve seen a number of armchair experts stress that the layoffs affect “non-development” roles, as if that’s OK. While it’s good to remind yourself that people are responsible for the games you love, it’s also people who provide customer service and community management and support for those games. And all of them – whether they’re directly involved in the actual creation of the game you’re playing – play a vital role in bringing those games to market and keeping them exciting and vibrant and entertaining.

Phil Savage



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The Spy

BUT WHO WATCHES THE SPY?

The Spy hasn't touched paper money since the late-'90s, when bands of street magicians roamed the street, thrusting decks of cards into the hands of unsuspecting commuters. The Spy went to hand over a £5 note in exchange for a new copy of *Rollercoaster* by B*Witched – the original having been destroyed during a tobogganing incident, as was the trend at the time – when it was intercepted by a figure wearing a leather jacket and aggressively sharp goatee.

Not breaking eye contact, the wiry miscreant waved a hand, and, in a flash of smoke, The Spy's money vanished. A quick search of his unconscious body revealed no sign of the note, and, with the sound of sirens growing closer, The Spy was forced to retreat sans the joy of an Irish pop quartet who *really* loved theme parks. And yet, it seems, some didn't learn the same lessons about the illusive and fleeting nature of currency. Take corporations, for instance. They *love* money. Seriously, go up to a corporation and ask, "If you love money so much, why don't you *marry* it." They'll reply, "We did, though. We married the money."

Activision, Ubisoft and EA each expressed their love recently through earnings calls, all appropriately (read:

SOMETHING INVOLVING RABBIDS? IT'S PROBABLY SOMETHING INVOLVING RABBIDS

depressingly) held in the proximity of Valentine's Day. While much of the calls were just a series of extended smooching noises, they were interspersed with sprinkles of information about each publisher's upcoming plans.

Ubisoft, for instance, took time out from bragging about *The Division 2* picking up more PC pre-orders than its predecessor (friendly The Spy reminder – don't preorder games) to tease plans to release three to four AAA games in the next fiscal year. While they named no names, Ubisoft has already mentioned that *Assassin's Creed* is skipping this year, and both *Far Cry New Dawn* and *The Division 2* are releasing before the fiscal year begins in April. The one game we do know about is *Skull & Bones*, due sometime in 2019. As for the rest... *Just Dance?* *Splinter Cell?* Something involving Rabbids? It's probably something involving Rabbids.

Activision used its earnings call to do whatever the opposite of winning hearts and minds is called. But around *that*, CFO Dennis Durkin revealed that Blizzard was "not planning a major frontline release" in 2019. All is not lost though as "looking further ahead, Blizzard's pipeline of PC, console, and mobile content is richer than ever". That is certainly one way to phrase the fact that a studio will release some games one day.

MONEY FOR GAME'S SAKE

It was also revealed that the non-Blizzard bit of Activision Blizzard – the bit that is almost exclusively dedicated to releasing *Call of Duty* games – will be releasing a *Call of Duty* game. *And* that the aforementioned *Call of Duty* game is likely to have a singleplayer campaign. The Spy would claim this was notable coming after the exclusively multiplayer *Black Ops 4*, but the English language called and demanded The Spy stopped torturing the word notable.

EA also had an earnings call, which... wait a second,

what's that? The Spy went to brush an errant hair out of The Spy's darting eye and noticed something tucked behind The Spy's ear. Is it? Could it be? The Spy's £5 note! The *prestige!* ■
The Spy



THE SPY
The Spy trades exclusively in invisible money.

This month in... 2009



1 This was quite the time for *Battlefield* projects but, looking back, the most interesting is *Battlefield Heroes*. At that time its free-to-play PvP plus microtransactions model felt like a terrifying risk rather than a standard offering and as we noted in the mag, "This is the first time PC Gamer has ever put a free game on its cover."

ISSUE
199, April 2009
ON THE COVER
Battlefield
IN THE CHARTS
Number 1 – Tinchy Stryder ft. N-Dubz

2 A brilliant fan-made Aperture Science Handheld Portal Device was so spectacular we had to ask creator Harrison Krix to share how it was made!



3 Before he got famous with *Gunpoint*, Tom Francis made *Blunt Force Trauma* for PCG's in-house 24 hour game jam. *BFT* features breezeblocks falling on people's heads. "His head got stoved in," says Tom, "It was hilarious." Graham Smith, meanwhile, focused on a *Far Cry 2* text adventure and is now developing *Primetime Detective*. Maybe we should revisit this game jam idea...



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WEB 1.0

Artist and director Jay Tholen on creating a nostalgic alternate '90s internet for the wonderfully weird **HYPNOSPACE OUTLAW**. *By Andy Kelly*

OLD SCHOOL

1 "The old web aesthetic is fascinating to me because all kinds of everyday non-tech people were being drawn into the digital world for the first time. The internet was a blank canvas. There was no visual consistency."

IMAGE CONSCIOUS

2 "For the bad pre-rendered animated gifs I used old 3D software packages such as Wings3D and Bryce 5.5. I then converted them into my own 'Hypnospace safe' 64-colour palette using Floyd-Steinberg dithering."

INTERNET EXPLORER

3 "For the browser I drew up a design and sent it to Mike Lasch, our programmer, who made it real and functional. Over time we added new features such as bookmarks, virtual pets, and a functioning media player."

NEW BUILD

4 "All of the pages in the game were created using the Hypnospace Page Builder, which we've bundled with the game for players to make their own. We're hoping to add support for creating networks of pages too."

GOLDEN YEARS

5 "If *Hypnospace Outlaw* has any kind of message, it's to scrutinise the fuzzy nostalgia we often cling to, and that very human tendency to measure everything against what we consider 'the good old days'."

CUSTOM MADE

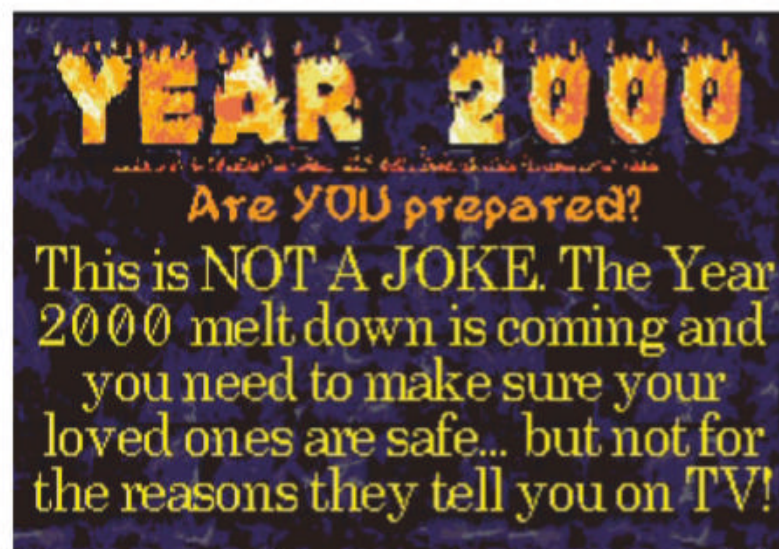
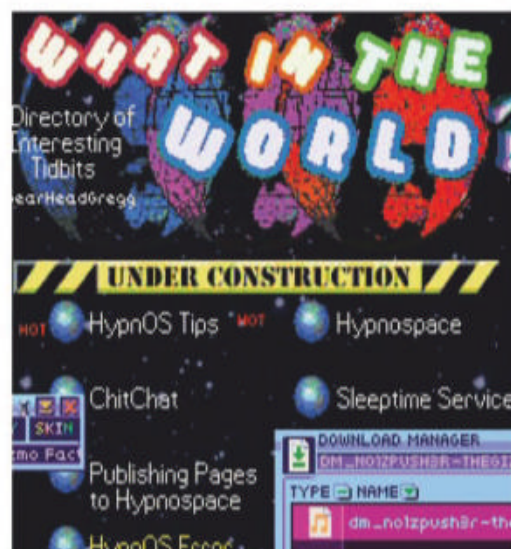
6 "Players can change their desktop wallpaper, visual/window colour, sound theme, and screensaver. You can also add stickers to your desktop, customise your 'start' menu, and add fancy cursor trails."



LEFT: Old web pages were cobbled together from clipart CD-ROMs or stolen from other sites – an aesthetic Tholen and his team have brilliantly recreated in *Hypnospace Outlaw*'s web.

BELOW: The drama of the dreaded 'Millennium bug' is one of many old internet things skewered by *Hypnospace Outlaw*. The game celebrates the '90s web, but isn't afraid to highlight how silly it was too.

RIGHT: It wouldn't be the old internet without an under construction gif. *Hypnospace* will feature several classic animated gifs from Sevenoaks, a prominent gif maker from in the 1990s.



LICENSING LIMITATIONS

The limitations of the licensed game process. *By Xalavier Nelson Jr*

As easy as it is to poke fun at licensed games like the infamous *Aliens: Colonial Marines*, looking at them from a different perspective raises a fascinating question. The process of making a licensed game involves a maze of stakeholders, scheduling concerns, and legal manoeuvring. Why do good creative opportunities and good developers release projects that are less than the sum of their parts?

Tom Forsyth is an industry veteran who spent years at Valve and Oculus, among other companies. Once upon a time, though, he was a programmer on *Blade 2*. “For arcane licensing reasons,” Forsyth recalls, “we only had permission to use Wesley Snipes’ likeness in one place – the box cover – but Mr Snipes could not appear anywhere in-game. Of course *Blade* had to be in the game and he had to look as close to the *Blade* in the film as possible, but without looking too much like Mr Snipes who played him in the movie. No, this didn’t make any sense to anybody else either. So the artists were driven mad sending both concept and in-game art to the publisher, and every even week it would be ‘this looks too much like Snipes’ and every odd week was ‘this doesn’t look like *Blade*’.” Concerns like this one just chewed further into a razor-thin schedule, on top of the regular complexities of development. *Blade 2* currently holds a 49 on Metacritic.

“It’s a strange experience working on a project, knowing that it is not going to turn out well, knowing on some level that it’s not even really intended to,” says Steve Rhoades, a level designer for 2006 action game *The Sopranos: Road to Respect*. The studio was divided between two masters: THQ, their publisher, and HBO, the owner of the licence. “I

remember meetings at a table with at least four or five folks from HBO present,” Rhoades says. “A lot of teleconferences. 7 Studios’ process was pretty document heavy by modern standards, and I wrote every level

design doc for that game. My life for a few months was revising each document based on HBO feedback, then sending the doc to THQ, revising for their feedback, rinsing and repeating. I’m honestly not sure how many folks at either HBO or THQ had veto power, but both of their word was law from our perspective. Most of HBO’s feedback was to remove the stuff THQ had just asked me to add, and the reverse was equally true.” Rhoades left the studio before the game finished production, but his experience of working to contradictory mandates isn’t rare.

THE ARTISTS WERE DRIVEN MAD SENDING BOTH CONCEPT AND IN-GAME ART TO THE PUBLISHER

DO WE SAVE THE CHEERLEADER?

Steve Bowler was one of the lead developers on *Gemini: Heroes Reborn*, a game created to tie into the upcoming TV show’s release. “We were told on one of the conference calls that our biggest problem on the game art-wise was that ‘it didn’t look anything like the show’,” Bowler said. “When we asked if we could see footage of the show, we were told ‘no’. We couldn’t even fly out there in a locked office with our phones confiscated. They just said there was no way we were going to be able to see footage beyond the couple of trailers/commercials that were released.” The shortage of information impacted character abilities as well. Some abilities would be rejected for being too similar to abilities used in the show, but the studio couldn’t offer a list for the developers to avoid. “I had to come up with a game where we called them back later with our laundry list of our A, B, and C tier abilities we wanted to use, and we’d go through them one by one and they’d tell us if we could use them or not,” said Bowler. His team ultimately had 11 months to produce the entirety of the game, as well as the framework of a tie-in mobile project.

The stories go on and on, even for well-received projects like *Friday the 13th: Killer Puzzle*. The licence for that franchise is now trapped in a legal limbo that keeps all of the creators involved from doing anything further with their creations.

When you see a bad licensed game, it could be that its development was an utter disaster. However it’s even more likely that everyone involved *wanted* to release something special, but didn’t have the time, corporate structure, or resources to enable its creation. ■

XALAVIER NELSON JR
I’m a full-time game writer and narrative designer, with credits inside and out of gaming.





The devs of *The Sopranos: Road to Respect* were told not to “screw up” plans for future seasons of the show, despite not being told what those plans were.



FAR LEFT: *Blade 2* was unable to use the likeness of the actor Wesley Snipes.

LEFT: After Warner Bros found out that the people behind the PC version of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* had contact with J.K. Rowling without their approval, the devs were forced to remove Hedwig from the game.

LICENSED LEGENDS *Licensed successes that made a mark on the universes they are attached to*



BATMAN: ARKHAM ASYLUM/CITY/KNIGHT
The *Batman: Arkham* series created a distinctly gritty version of the character and his rogue's gallery, to the point that new media was able to be licensed from Rocksteady's twist on the franchise.



MIDDLE-EARTH: SHADOW OF WAR
Taking liberties with the *Lord of the Rings* canon brought change to a familiar universe, for better (playable black badass Baranor) and worse (human Shelob).



ALIEN: ISOLATION
Treated like a valid addition to the *Alien* mythology and disconnected from the schedule of any other media, *Alien: Isolation* injects a gorgeous, sprawling, and terrifying interactive experience into the margins of the *Aliens* universe.



THE DARKNESS
An adaptation of comics published by Top Cow, games about *The Darkness* ditch much of the wider supernatural machinations of its world in favour of grounded, hyper-violent, surprisingly smart tales of emotion and madness.

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Final Fantasy XIV: Shadowbringers



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
July 2, 2019

DEVELOPER
Square Enix

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
www.finalfantasyxiv.com

FINAL FANTASY XIV: SHADOWBRINGERS

The MMO takes a walk on the dark side in its next expansion

Always being the goody two-shoes hero in *Final Fantasy XIV* is getting a little tiresome. The Warriors of Light have spent five years and two expansions defending Eorzea from the evil Garlean Empire. But with *Shadowbringers*, it's time to fight fire with fire. The future of the world depends on it.

At least, that's what I think is happening. The story of *Shadowbringers*, *Final Fantasy XIV*'s third expansion that launches on July 2, 2019, is wrapped up in a maddening blanket of riddles that I can only speculate over. What happened in the interim between the current *Stormblood* expansion and *Shadowbringers* to bring about a calamity that threatens to destroy the world? Why does that calamity necessitate hanging up my good guy cloak and becoming a Warrior of Darkness? And, just as importantly, what the hell does that title even mean?

As I walk the convention floor of *Final Fantasy XIV*'s Fan Festival in Paris, it's these questions that I keep returning to. Though it primarily serves as a place for fans to gather and celebrate their love of all things *Final Fantasy*, Square Enix also uses these events to reveal new details about what's to come in future updates. But much of *Shadowbringers* feels like a closely kept secret.

During the keynote presentation, game director Naoki Yoshida revealed an extended teaser trailer – and never has the word teaser been more applicable. Ominous dialogue reflects back on the decisions and pivotal plot moments that led our characters toward an apocalypse the nature of which we don't even understand yet. Meanwhile, main

characters battle monsters between cuts to dramatic dialogue scenes rife with clues that only hardcore fans would pick up. People scream when fan favourite character Y'shtola takes the screen wearing black robes, suggesting that she might have given up the healing arts for the destructive magics of a Black Mage. Others gasp when a hooded character is revealed to be a youthful-looking Minfilia, an important character who supposedly died years ago during the early chapters of the *Heavensward* expansion.

Unless you're a dedicated fan of *Final Fantasy XIV*, most of this means little to you. That's because *Final Fantasy XIV*'s new expansions aren't trying to win over new players nearly as much as they're playing to the desires of a passionate and vibrant fanbase. And if the previous two expansions and their massive post-launch updates are anything to go by, Square Enix does a damn fine job of it.

GOING DARK

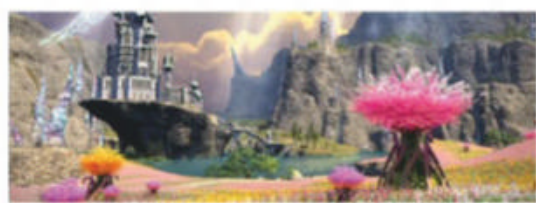
Thanks to its decidedly bleaker tone and exciting new features, *Shadowbringers* is *Final Fantasy XIV*'s most exciting expansion yet. Following the events of *Stormblood*, which saw players liberate the nations of Ala Mhigo and Doma from the Garlean Empire and then try and fail to secure a lasting peace, *Shadowbringers* thrusts players into direct all-out war with the villains of Eorzea on their own turf. Like the previous expansions that means an enormous new story to chew through as players explore new locales and increase their level up to the new cap of 80.

But exactly where and when *Shadowbringers* takes place is still a complete mystery. During the keynote presentation at the Fan Festival, Yoshida revealed details of the new locations, features, and jobs, but without a better idea of what the central storyline will be, it's hard to get a sense for how everything will fit together. I'm beginning to think that the reason so much is being kept a secret is because Square Enix is planning

FIRST LOOK



PEOPLE SCREAM WHEN FAN FAVOURITE CHARACTER Y'SHTOLA TAKES THE SCREEN

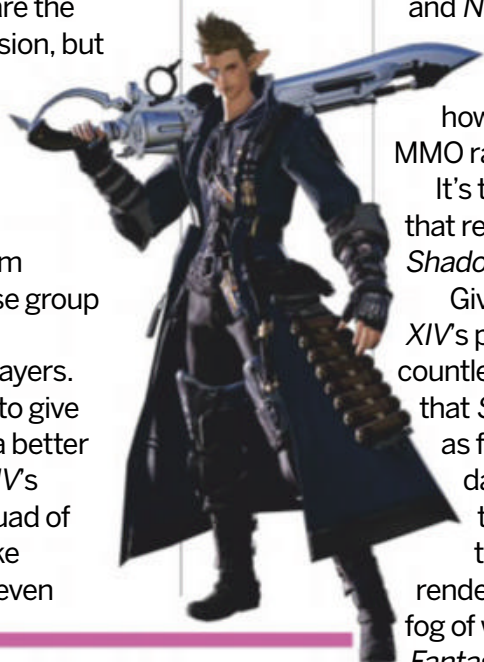
Final Fantasy XIV: Shadowbringers

➤ something audacious in the opening act – and players have theorised that time travel or parallel universes may play a role.

I'm not too fussed because what really matters is that after all these years gunblades are finally coming back to *Final Fantasy*. Players of the new Gunbreaker class (called a job in *FFXIV* parlance) can live out their Squall Leonhart fantasies as they take on the role of a tank in a party. Like the other tank jobs like Dark Knight and Paladin, Gunbreakers draw the attention of monsters away from the more fragile members of a group. While not much is known about their specific abilities or playstyle, Yoshida mentioned that Gunbreakers use the gun part of their swordy-guns to enhance their melee attacks rather than as a dedicated ranged weapon. It's just one of several new jobs coming in *Shadowbringers*, with the rest to be revealed at a later date.

Gunblades aren't the only bit of *Final Fantasy* milieu that's washing onto the shores of Square Enix's MMO, either. Much to the excitement of just about everyone in that Paris convention centre, Yoshida revealed the new player race would be the Viera – those scantily-clothed bunny women who first appeared in *Final Fantasy XII*. Yoshida was unwilling to comment on whether this would be *Final Fantasy XIV*'s first female-only race or if there would be scantily-clothed bunny men too, but I'm betting on the latter since he said more information would be made available during the Fan Festival in Japan later this year.

New jobs and a new race are the predictable parts of an expansion, but *Shadowbringers* is also bringing some new surprises too. In addition to a whopping nine new dungeons, there's also a new feature called the Trust System that will let players tackle these group activities with a party of AI companions instead of real players. The idea, Yoshida explains, is to give people who prefer to go solo a better opportunity to jump into *FFXIV*'s group content, joined by a squad of important story characters like Y'shtola. It'll make *FFXIV* feel even



AFTER ALL THESE YEARS GUNBLADES ARE COMING BACK TO FINAL FANTASY

more like a traditional single player *Final Fantasy* game. Likewise, players who prefer crafting and gathering jobs will have an entirely new endgame activity that involves using your trade skills to rebuild the city-state of Ishgard.

There are lots of smaller changes too, like a new game-plus mode that will allow players to go back and replay story quests but using their current gear and abilities. A world transfer system will let players freely visit other servers located in their same geographic region, helping reduce any barriers between friends and letting you mingle with even more players. And, as expected, this expansion will trim more fat from the battle system while adding more abilities for all jobs so you have something to look forward to as you level up.

Shadowbringers will also add even more Primal boss battles that will naturally weave in with the main story. These group fights have quickly become one of my favourite things about *FFXIV* because many pay homage to iconic *Final Fantasy* bosses while subverting the mechanics of your average MMO raid.

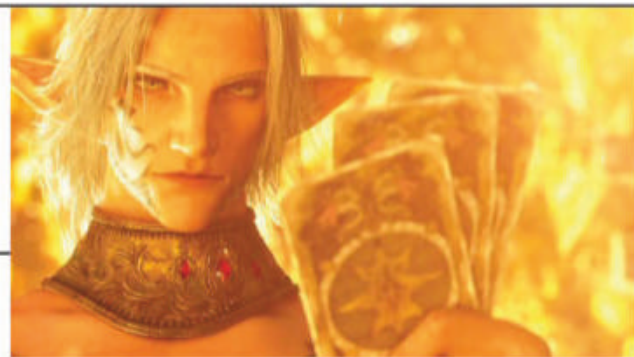
2B OR NOT 2B?

They won't have to do all the heavy lifting, though. Easily the best reveal from the keynote presentation is that *Nier: Automata*'s eccentric creator Yoko Taro and *Dragon Quest* producer Yosuke Saito would join forces to create an entire raid based on *Nier: Automata*. Called *Yorha: Dark Apocalypse*, this high-level group activity will somehow merge *Final Fantasy* and *Nier* in a bizarre crossover, and I can't wait to see what absurd things Taro is able to cook up and how they translate to a traditional MMO raid.

It's these unexpected announcements that really get me excited to play *Shadowbringers* this summer.

Given how excellent *Final Fantasy XIV*'s previous two expansions and countless updates are, I have no concerns that *Shadowbringers* won't be equally as fun. Having my hero embrace his dark side sounds like an interesting twist, but I'm honestly just excited to explore more stunningly rendered landscapes and peel back the fog of war that surrounds some of *Final Fantasy XIV*'s lesser known continents. *Final Fantasy XIV* might not be the most innovative MMO, but its quality – from the storytelling to the epic raid boss battles – is unmatched.

Steven Messner



Thancred becomes the first Gunbreaker.

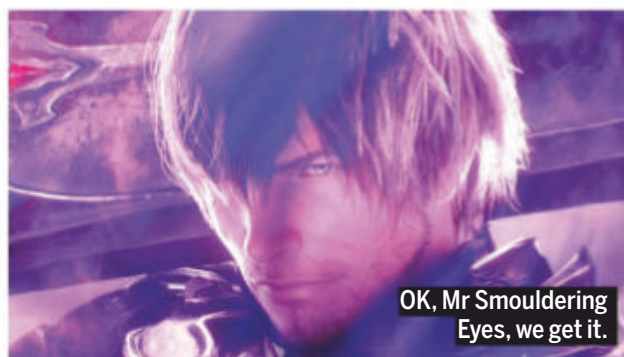


The Trust system lets you battle alongside story characters.

Final Fantasy XIV: Shadowbringers



My money is on the angel demon lady.



OK, Mr Smouldering Eyes, we get it.



PREVIEW

Rising Lords

Life was harder before we evolved legs.



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
Release 2019

DEVELOPER
Argonwood

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
www.argonwood.com

RISING LORDS

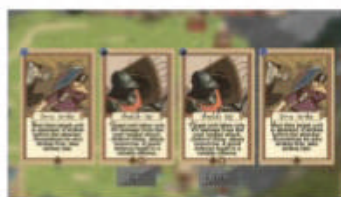
Medieval turn-based strategy inspired by board games

Developed by two brothers, Chris and Manu Fernholz, *Rising Lords* is a turn-based strategy game with a medieval twist. The Fernholz brothers have a history in developing pen-and-paper and board games, and some aspects of that type of design have made their way into this, their first big videogame venture. It's an intriguing project, and the brothers' mission is to, in their words, shake up existing game genres and infuse them with new ideas. Well, you can't fault their ambition.

PLAYED IT



I'm immediately struck by how nice *Rising Lords* looks and feels. It's like a medieval tapestry come to life, with bold, chunky art and smooth animation. I'm playing an early alpha version of the battle system and I'm commanding a group of knights, squashing a peasant uprising. It's a fairly typical 4X turn-based strategy game, with terrain affecting your troops' movement speed and other factors – but the addition of cards makes things more interesting.



You're dealt a hand at the beginning of a battle and these can be used on your knights to apply buffs and other effects.

Use a card called First Strike on a soldier and the next time they're attacked, they strike first. Another card, Shields Up, ensures a target only takes five per cent damage from the next ranged attack. Then there's Formation, which grants a unit a +3 bonus to a stat called Retaliation, which determines the likelihood of a counter-attack. The game's fusion of turn-based strategy, CCGs, and board games is confidently done, although the build I'm playing is bare-bones compared to what's being touted for the final game.

The social division of the time period will apparently play into the strategy and systems, letting you, for example, throw

untrained serfs into battle as cannon fodder – but at the risk of causing a revolt in your cities. You'll collect taxes, forge weapons, build strongholds and raise armies. The brothers are also promising resource gathering, diplomacy, treason, tax, and managing production, which sounds phenomenally ambitious for such a small team.

CAMPAIGN FOR DAYS

Rising Lords will feature a singleplayer story and multiplayer for up to four people, which can either be a quick match or a campaign that lasts several days. It has hints of grand strategy games such as *Crusader Kings* and *Europa Universalis*, but a relatively minimalist interface, and that slick, fast-paced card-based combat, mean it could be a much more immediately accessible way to role-play as a feudal medieval lord. I also like that I'll have the chance to play as a tyrant or a benevolent ruler. *Rising Lords* is still a way off, and more pre-release alphas are planned to fine-tune its systems, but it has a lot of potential.

Andy Kelly

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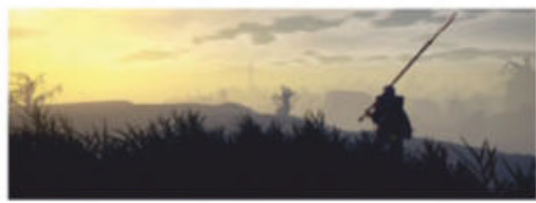
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PREVIEW

Outward



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE

March 26, 2019

DEVELOPER

Nine Dots

PUBLISHER

Deep Silver

LINK

www.ninedotsstudio.com

OUTWARD

Finally, the survival game I've been looking for

I'm 12 hours into fantasy RPG *Outward* when I travel to its second region, visit the city of Berg for the first time, and buy my first proper backpack. Strange to say that buying a backpack feels momentous, but damnit, it really is. I feel triumphant discarding my primitive satchel and shouldering a real pack on my back.

Not only does it fit more loot, but I can hang a lantern from it, so I can have both hands free and still see in the dark. That's the kind of game *Outward* is, one where the things you take for granted in other games feel like a real accomplishment.

I've also been humbled repeatedly in my 12 hours. I've been battered unconscious by large birds and angry deer, gouged by hidden spike traps, and pummeled senseless by scruffy bandits. One time I even ran into the wrong castle and was imprisoned in a mining colony beneath it, from which I only escaped by first convincing the guards to let me work in the kitchen, stealing back my precious backpack from the fort's storage room, then leaping into a pit and washing up later on a beach, freezing, confused, wracked with pain, and dying of thirst. I had to build a fire for warmth, chow down on some dried mushrooms, tear my hood into linen scraps to use as bandages, and brew a potion with my alchemy kit to regain my senses. *Outward* is a fantasy game with monsters and wizards, but it's also an engrossing survival experience.

I tend to enjoy the beginning of RPGs more than the endings. I love to start *Oblivion* or *Skyrim* over with a new character, penniless and talentless, relishing the early hours of play when every rusty dagger and basic leather boot is a treasure. I find the hardscrabble life more satisfying than hours later when I'm

PLAYED
IT

dumping complete sets of armour out of my inventory because I simply don't need them and can't even be bothered to sell them, that's how damn rich and powerful I've become. I also love games like *Stalker* and *DayZ* where no matter how many hours I put in, and no matter how much great gear I collect, I'm essentially no stronger or sturdier than the average person. I remain fragile and mortal, where the slightest misstep can leave me inches from death. It makes every encounter a tense and memorable one.

I find those same feelings pervade in *Outward*. You play as an ordinary, common person who can contract a cold and suffer from indigestion and can easily lose a fight to a large crab.

I get genuinely excited at every piece of new gear I find or buy, even knowing they won't turn me into a superhero. And this feeling of being a common mortal is especially interesting here, because you don't actually die in *Outward*.

FIGHTING ON

Similar to games like *Mount & Blade*, losing all your health in a fight results in you falling unconscious to the ground. You'll wake up again, bruised, battered, often hungry and thirsty, and suffering other negative effects.

Sometimes you'll be thrown in a bandit's camp or fort and have to find your gear and make an escape. Other times a mysterious, unseen benefactor will have dragged you to safety and you'll awaken next to a burning campfire with a helpful potion and a friendly note. Sometimes you'll be unceremoniously dumped outside the dungeon you were defeated in, other times you'll wake up in the safety of the nearest big city so you can put yourself back together.

This sounds like an extremely forgiving system – and some might say it's not a true survival game if you can't actually die – but at times it can feel pretty punishing. Typically, upon losing a fight in a game, I want to reload my last save and plunge

YOU PLAY AS AN ORDINARY, COMMON PERSON WHO CAN CONTRACT A COLD



In a pinch, lanterns can be hurled at foes.

Towns, for when you're sick of sleeping in a tent.



It's not a huge open world, but there's plenty to discover.

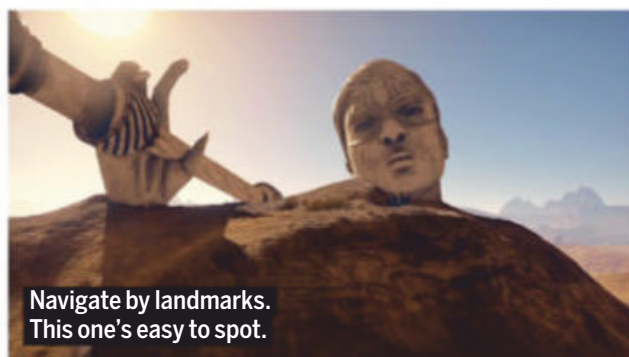


PREVIEW

Outward



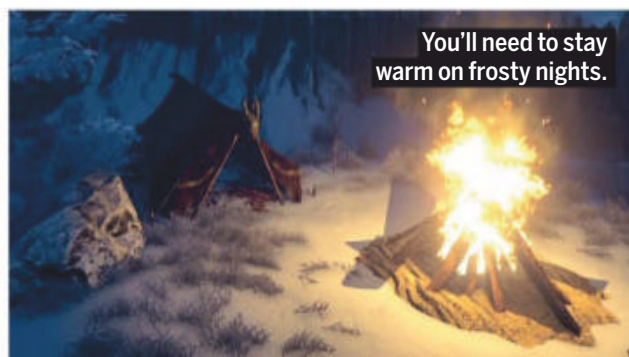
A big backpack can carry more, but makes you less nimble.



Navigate by landmarks. This one's easy to spot.



Hungry? Head on out and hunt.



➤ back in. *Outward* auto-saves for you constantly, meaning there is no going back. Make a bad choice and you're stuck with it. Lose a battle, and you'll have to pick yourself up and find your way back to it to try again.

After a defeat you can wake up clear on the other side of the map, so it can take ages to pick up where you left off (and there's no fast-travel, either). I failed a timed quest because some monsters beat me up and I woke up too far away to return to the quest giver in time, which was a considerable setback. The lesson is clear. Don't start fights unless you need to. Flee when you have to. Make choices carefully. Always be prepared. Losing isn't fatal, but it can certainly be a headache.

I also acquired my first magic spells in those dozen hours, after a considerably tricky journey to the centre of a mountain to meet some wizards. And even using spells is a bit of a survival challenge. To begin with, you need to permanently trade some of your maximum health and stamina to even acquire the mana needed to cast spells, making yourself physically weaker in order to become more spiritually powerful.

And as for the spells I learned, one is called Spark. It's weak. It's wimpy. It does a bit of damage, and burns enemies a little over time, but it's like flicking a lit match at someone and hoping it overwhelms them. To really put it to use, I need physical components. I can mine mana stones from glowing mineral deposits with a pickaxe, and then use an alchemy kit (purchased) over a campfire (crafted) to mix oil (found or purchased) with those magic rocks to create fire stones.

With those fire stones in my inventory, I can cast a flaming sigil on the ground, and as long as I'm within that burning magic circle, my wimpy Spark spell will now burst with power.

It's a lot of work to cast spells, in other words, and that work makes it enjoyable. In *Outward* spellcasting is a process, one of preparation and crafting and ritual. It makes spells feel weighty, makes you deliberate before using them, and having used them, feels like an accomplishment (or a waste, sometimes, if you use them on creatures that perhaps didn't justify it).

THE MORE SILVER YOU CARRY, THE LESS YOU CAN CARRY OF EVERYTHING ELSE

And all this for a simple, low-level fireball spell, which most RPGs give you as a matter of course so you're not out in the wild with empty hands.

That design follows through with just about everything you do in *Outward*. You need to keep yourself fed and hydrated and sleep regularly or begin to suffer negative effects on your stamina and health. You can lay down a simple bedroll at night, but you won't rest as well as you do in a tent or a bed, and you may be ambushed in the wild unless you devote some hours to standing guard – meaning less replenishment from sleep. You can get too warm and too cold, depending on the weather and circumstances, meaning you'll want fur clothing for cold climates and desert gear in arid ones.

Want to visit another region? Prepare travel rations by cooking meat and salt in a pot, carry any number of restorative potions, bring anything else you think you might need because it's a long, slow trip back if you forget something. And all of that gear weighs you down, right down to how much water is in your waterskins and how much money you have on you. Sure, it's great to have a few hundred pieces of silver to spend in the next city, but the more silver you carry, the less you can carry of everything else.

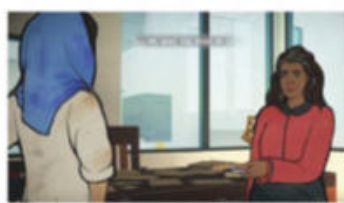
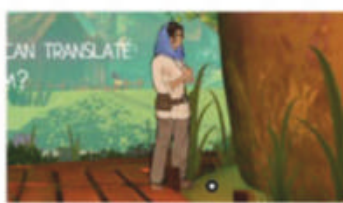
QUESTS GALORE

I haven't even mentioned the story! There is one, and I'm enjoying it, though I'm not far into it yet. There are lots of NPCs, a main quest, side quests, plus dungeons, forts, and caves to explore. I haven't talked about weapon skills – you can learn them by helping NPCs with quests or purchasing them from experts (I can throw my lit lantern at someone for a makeshift fireball if I'm desperate and can't cast my Spark spell). You can increase your health and stamina and mana, usually by visiting trainers and plying them with silver.

There's dozens of recipes for cooking and alchemy and the crafting of weapons and armour. There's a lot going on in *Outward*. There's even local and online co-op, which I have yet to try. For now I'm mainly taking pleasure in the survival elements, the preparation that I perform before stepping outside the safety of city walls, my lovely backpack filled with potions I've brewed and food I've cooked and weapons I've crafted and repaired, and maybe some silver to spend in the next city. If I make it there in one piece.

Chris Livingston

Heaven's Vault



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
Spring 2019

DEVELOPER
inkle Ltd

PUBLISHER
inkle Ltd

LINK
inklestudios.com/heavensvault

HEAVEN'S VAULT

The past is a foreign language

One of the games I'm looking forward to in 2019 is inkle's *Heaven's Vault*. The studio, whose previous work includes the phenomenal *80 Days*, is combining detective work with archaeology and translation, and the game is shaping up to be quite special.

The basic premise sees you, archaeologist Aliya Elasra, and a robot companion take on a request to find missing roboticist Janniqi Renba. Over the course of the new demo, Renba's disappearance is revealed to be anything but straightforward, calling into question at least one of your key relationships and nudging you towards an investigation of a greater set of problems rooted in the region's ancient history.

The way you unravel any of this is by sailing around the area of space called the Nebula, exploring locations. As you do so you'll be able to interact with both contemporary sources of information and ancient relics. In inhabited areas you'll chat with people you meet. Poking about in ruined buildings or investigating glints in the dirt will reveal artefacts and accompanying snippets of ancient text for you to decipher.

At first your translations will be based around context clues and guesswork. But the more snippets you accumulate the better you'll be able to translate. This process is absorbing, I've played each demo multiple times, even trying to break the game just to collect more text fragments and advance my dictionary.

Philippa Warr

THE MORE SNIPPETS YOU ACCUMULATE THE BETTER YOU'LL BE ABLE TO TRANSLATE

1 You're not exclusively focused on the past. You'll also discover more about current social structures. The farmers on the moon of Maersi clearly fear you and are being treated as an underclass of some kind. Colleagues at the university don't all value your work and so on.

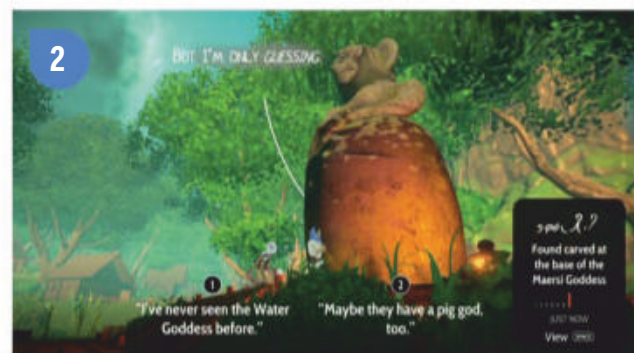
2 Text might be hidden anywhere so it pays to look everywhere – I've found words and phrases on objects in mud, on weapons hidden above doors, etched onto statues, painted onto walls, shared via conversations with colleagues and more.

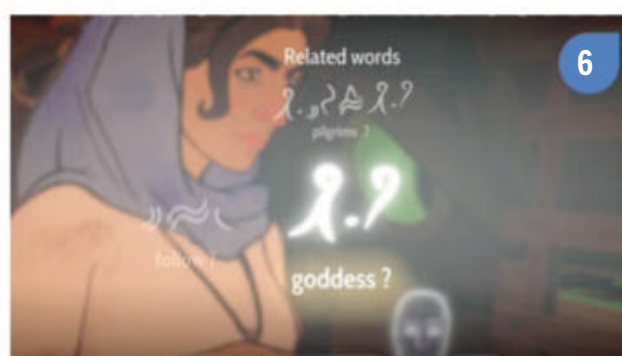
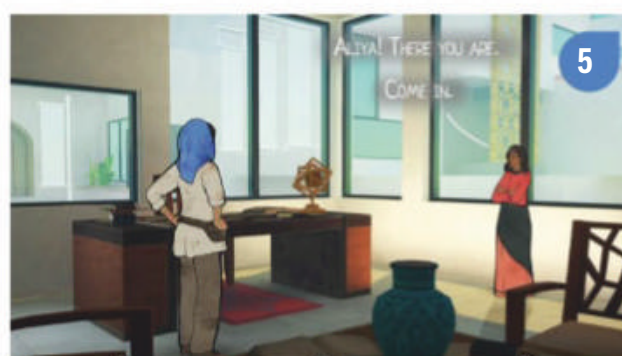
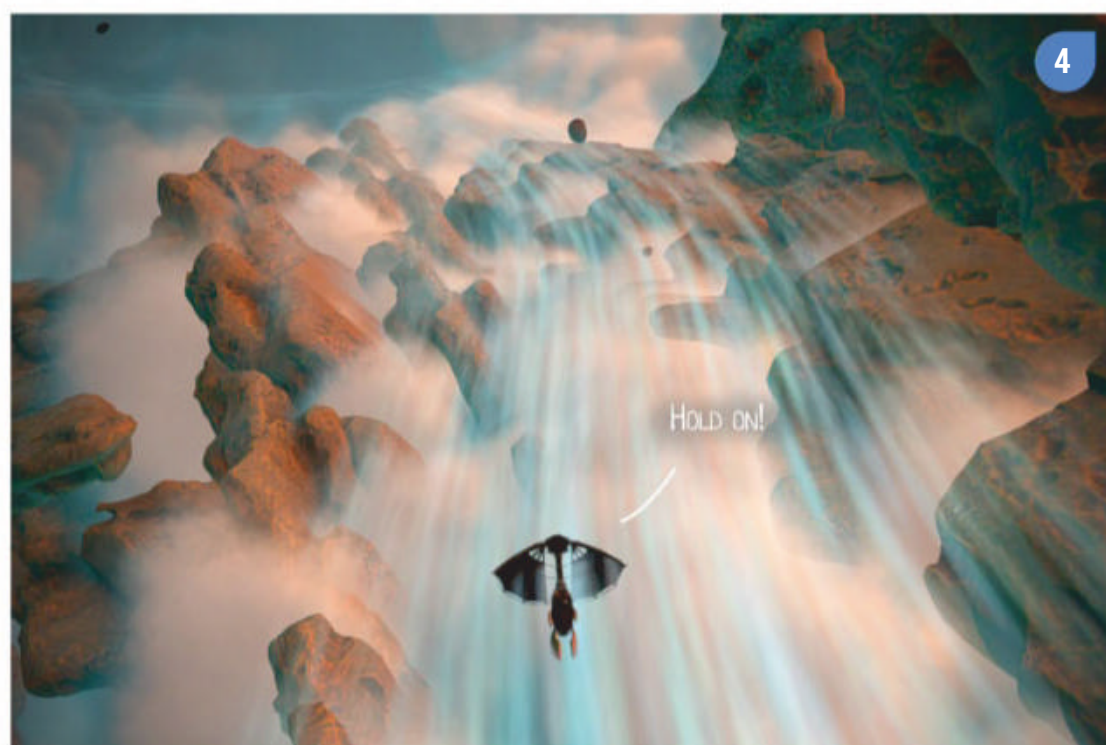
3 Context clues will help with early translations. Eagles are a symbol of the Empire so "Emperor" and "Empress" are good bets for objects adorned with eagles. A mound of earth with a marker at one end is likely to be a grave so a funeral inscription is more likely there.

4 The travel is the thing I'm not quite sold on yet. You cruise to locations by riding river-like currents in a ship. In comparison with the rest of what you do (and within the confines of a linear demo slice where most locations are unavailable) it felt a bit dull.

5 While playing Aliya as a friendly person meant more goodwill from others, I really enjoyed the options which cast her as a jerk. No Huang, I don't want to listen to your story. Myari, I'll only find your friend if there's something in it for me. Six, let's assume this guy's dead and call it a day...

6 Refining translations feels great. If a new word uses similar glyphs to existing translations you can use those to deduce it has a related meaning. You can also go back to old translations and use new information to inform those at any point.





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WARHAMMER: VERMINTIDE II WAS SO SUCCESSFUL THAT IT TOOK ITS SMALL SWEDISH DEVELOPER BY SURPRISE.

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ITS COMMUNITY IS HUNGRY FOR MORE, AND – AFTER A YEAR OF MAKING ADJUSTMENTS AND LAYING INFRASTRUCTURE – FATSHARK IS READY TO DELIVER.

WITH **VERMINTIDE II: WINDS OF MAGIC**, THE ENDGAME HAS ARRIVED.

By Phil Savage

COVER FEATURE

Warhammer Vermintide II: Winds of Magic

TOOLBOX

As with the other enemies, Beastmen will have lots of variation, including armour and shields.

I

t's easy to get carried away," says CEO Martin Wahlund. "You're proud of the game, you're proud of the reviews, and then suddenly you get scared as well. People are playing it!" After *Vermintide II*'s release, Wahlund found himself reacting to every bug report and complaint. At one point he messaged the team late at night because of an error report that, upon investigation, was down to the player's own internet connection being down.

Some of the game's early patches didn't receive enough testing, causing them to break other parts of the game. "It's such a bad experience for the player," says Wahlund. "If you're playing, and starting a career and using a certain weapon, and we break that weapon or break that career, it's like we ruined it."

"We had some bad experiences in the beginning where we were a bit too eager and released [an update] a bit too early," says Mårten Stormdal,

executive producer of *Vermintide II*. "We didn't have time to test properly, and we got some bad publicity for it. It was right, because we didn't do our work properly, but that has made us a bit more cautious."

"More professional," says Wahlund.

Fatshark slowed down and took stock of where they were and where they wanted to go. "We worked on the infrastructure," says Wahlund. "We needed to think about where we want to be in five years, because we want to build a game that people can play for a long time. We needed to do some organisational change internally and figure out how we handle a game that will live for many years."

In all, *Vermintide II*'s first year has been a learning experience for the small Swedish studio. And while Fatshark made the internal changes needed to secure the game's long term future, its existing playerbase grew impatient for both new content – just five new levels, across two paid-for DLC packs, were released in



ARMED
New weapons
are mostly
designed around
polearms, helping
you avoid getting
biffed.

the game's first year – and the arrival of systems promised before the game's launch.

Now, though, Fatshark is in a place where it feels ready to cater to that demand. The first stage of this new phase of *Vermintide II*'s life was the introduction of weekly challenges – added in an update released last month. The system is based on the concept of mutators – special rulesets that change the way you play, and sometimes even new versions of existing levels. On March 8, the date of the game's anniversary, players will be treated to a special challenge that sees *Vermintide*'s heroes embark on a tour of nearby inns, looking for ale.

As they drink and have slurred conversations – Kerillian has decided that everyone should call her queen – they gain a buff to their attack. But

if they go too long without a swig of ale, they become hungover. Drink too much, and they fall over. It's a fun celebration of everything *Vermintide II* does well: the combat, the banter, and even the lore, with Games Workshop stepping in to name the inns you visit.

Weekly challenges aren't just there to add variety, but also to give players something to work towards. While not available yet, the ultimate aim is for challenges to award a new

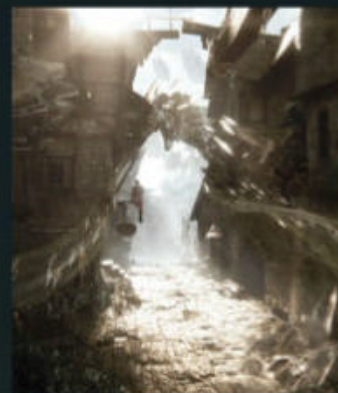
in-game currency that players can use to buy specific cosmetic items for their characters. "It's something people have been poking us for since launch," says Wahlund.

Both the cosmetic shop and the collectable paintings – also added with the weekly challenge update – are ways for players to work towards

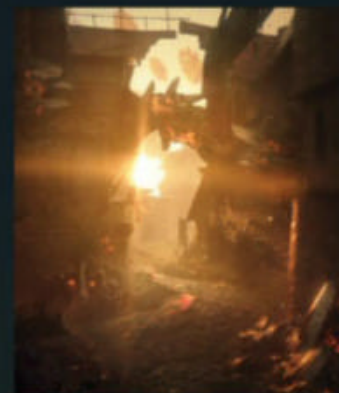
FATSHARK IS IN A PLACE WHERE IT CAN CATER TO THAT DEMAND

A KIND OF MAGIC

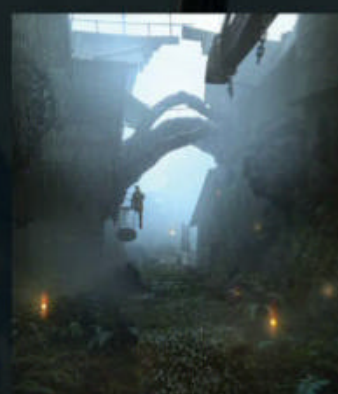
What are the eight Winds?



HYSH, THE WHITE WIND
Lore of Light
Illumination, healing and exorcism.



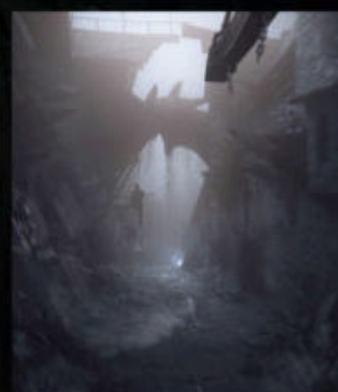
CHAMON, THE GOLD WIND
Lore of Metal
Alchemy and transmutation of metal.



GHYRAN, THE JADE WIND
Lore of Life
Healing and rejuvenation.



AZYR, THE BLUE WIND
Lore of Heavens
Curses, premonitions and lightning bolts.



ULGI, THE GREY WIND
Lore of Shadows
Confuse, obfuscate and wield shadowy tendrils.



SHYISH, THE PURPLE WIND
Lore of Death
Drain life, spread fear and communicate with spirits.



GHUR, THE AMBER WIND
Lore of Beasts
Communicate with or summon animals.



AQSHY, THE RED WIND
Lore of Fire
Just basically lots of fire. And maybe some brimstone.

COVER FEATURE

Warhammer Vermintide II: Winds of Magic



ABOVE: The Jade wind enhances nature. Kerillian will love it.

SHARP
The Gold Wind is all about metal and ore, hence this massive sword that dominates the background.

GORE

Yes, Bestigors will charge you. But their aim isn't amazing, so they might hit their allies too.

» a specific goal. But if your ambitions go beyond some fancy hats and nice pictures, Fatshark has a plan for you too. This year's biggest addition will take place this summer, with the release of *Vermintide II*'s first expansion, *Winds of Magic*.

The expansion will add a new enemy race, new difficulty and new weapons. At its heart, though, *Winds of Magic* is designed around one big idea: to give players an endless gauntlet of progressively more difficult challenges. "The basics of the expansion is to provide an endgame," says Wahlund.

Winds of Magic will likely offer an introductory story mission, but new adventure maps aren't the focus. Rather, the main progression path for the expansion is a new mode. "I think the most similar game mode would be the Greater Rifts that *Diablo III* has," says Wahlund, "where you go in and they scale in difficulty. We're not doing the same thing, though. We're doing it in our own way."

IT'S MAGIC

Each stage of *Winds of Magic*'s new mode is called a Weave, although that term – as with many things in the expansion, which only recently entered full production – is subject to change. Each Weave will take place on a chunk of an existing level marked by one of the eight Winds – the currents of magical energy that flow across the Warhammer universe.

"The idea behind the Winds is they're going to change the look and overall feel of the level completely," says programmer Tom Batsford. "Each Wind should look very different from each other, even on the same level, and also give a mutator."

RIGHT A selection of the angriest goats in the room.



Fatshark is still figuring out which mutators should be tied to each Wind, but the prototypes I'm shown seem designed to offer both positive and negative modifiers. The Life Wind, for instance, currently grants constant health regeneration, but causes players to lose health whenever they hit an enemy.

To aid variety, Fatshark plans to remix each level chunk. As an example, I'm shown a Weave that takes place on a section of Against the Grain, but played in reverse. To finish a Weave, players will be required to complete an objective, for example killing

enough enemies to fill a progress bar; slaying a certain number of a specific enemy, or capturing objectives placed around the map. "The objectives we have, we want them to be different," says Batsford. "We want them to be a different way to play the game rather than just going from A to B and killing stuff ... just different ways to play each time."

Once the objective is completed, a portal will open that will take players to an arena where they'll need to

complete a final event. "Right now we have one that is like survive waves [of enemies]," says Batsford. "Another one we have is where two bosses spawn and you have to defeat both of them. And the Wind mutator is in effect."

As players progress to higher Weaves, the difficulty will continue to increase. "We have continually scaling difficulty that goes way beyond the highest difficulty that we have in the game," says Batsford. "We don't want people to ever reach a cap on this. The cap will rather be when it gets just too hard for them to do it." While the first few Weaves will be fun, easy introductions to the modifiers, later ones will be harsher – providing less regen on Life Wind levels, for instance.

WEAVING A SPELL

One of the key ways *Winds of Magic*'s new mode will differ from *Diablo III*'s Greater Rifts is that Weaves won't be randomised. Everyone will be playing the same set of Weaves, meaning that players can work to find solutions to specific problems. More than just a combat challenge, Fatshark wants Weaves to feel like puzzles – challenging players to experiment with different weapon sets and career compositions. "People can then share that on forums, Reddit, whatever," says Batsford. "I think if we can nail that it's going to work out really nicely."

Another benefit of having predetermined Weaves is it lets Fatshark add leaderboards to the game. "You're going to get a score while you play these," explains Batsford, "and your score is going to be based on how long it took you to complete it, and then also how much damage you took. So you might have [a Weave] where the best way to get score is to do it slowly but make sure you don't take much damage, or you might have one where you speedrun it and it doesn't matter how much damage you take."

TO AID VARIETY, FATSHARK PLANS TO REMIX EACH LEVEL CHUNK

COVER FEATURE

Warhammer Vermintide II: Winds of Magic

✶ Beyond the individual Weaves, Fatshark is also planning a leaderboard that tracks how many Weaves you've completed in total. Thanks to the difficulty scaling, the gauntlet can be essentially infinite.

"Each of these Weaves is going to be hand tailored because we're removing the randomness from them," says Batsford. "We're going to need to set spawns for these and make sure they work for each one. But we're obviously not going to be able to do that endlessly. So we need to do that for a set amount, and then we'll probably repeat them with a higher difficulty."

I'm intrigued by the idea, and – even at this early stage – Fatshark is doing some cool things with the look of the Weaves. Metal stages are a bathed in rusty yellow. Veins of ore grow out of the ground like tree roots, and fields of giant swords appear off in the background. "The one I'm looking forward to the most is Fire," says Batsford, "because the idea right now is to get it so you can feel like you're walking through a forest fire. So it's like everything is burning, the sky is on fire, ash everywhere. It's the perfect excuse to get some Sienna voice lines going. She's loving it."

The key for Fatshark, I feel, will be nailing the mutators for each Wind – ensuring that each is fun to tackle and scales clearly – and offering a wide enough variety of objectives and scenarios. Something that may help, and that the team is currently considering as a possibility, is making the Weaves seasonal. That could potentially lead to new mutators being added each season, as well as a reshuffling of the order so that players get to experience Weaves they couldn't previously reach.

In addition to the new mode, Fatshark aims to shake up the base game as well. As you'll have noticed from our cover art, *Winds of Magic* is bringing Beastmen to the game. "We have this duality in the game," says Mats Andersson, head of *Vermintide II*'s action team. "We have a lot of players who are into it because of the feeling and the lore and the immersion, so the Beastmen are a huge part of that, because they're cool and scary and it's cool to play against them. And then we have that other set of challenge-based players, who really go in-depth to master the combat loop. We really want the

Beastmen to target both of those types – similar to what we're doing with the *Winds of Magic* mode."

The bulk of the Beastman force will be made up of Gors – the grunts analogous to the Skaven's Clanrats or Rotblood's Raiders. But it's the secondary units that make the Beastmen such interesting enemies. Smaller Ungors will rush players in great numbers – similar to the Skavenslaves – but will also fight in conjunction with Gors. "The thing we're experimenting with now is adding Ungors that use spears," says Andersson, "so we get enemies with a bit more distance ... you can have that thing where you're swinging the weapon and it's kind of nice, and all of a sudden I have guys that keep a bit more distance. I'm swinging my weapon and I'm not hitting it."

Fatshark is also experimenting with giving Ungors bows – potentially in large groups, making them difficult to take out at range. "One of the things these guys are supposed to be doing is giving one of your team members a problem to solve while fighting," says Andersson.

"Because, for the higher difficulties, I want more problems to be able to throw at the players, and have them clearly and distinctly provide different gameplay. This is

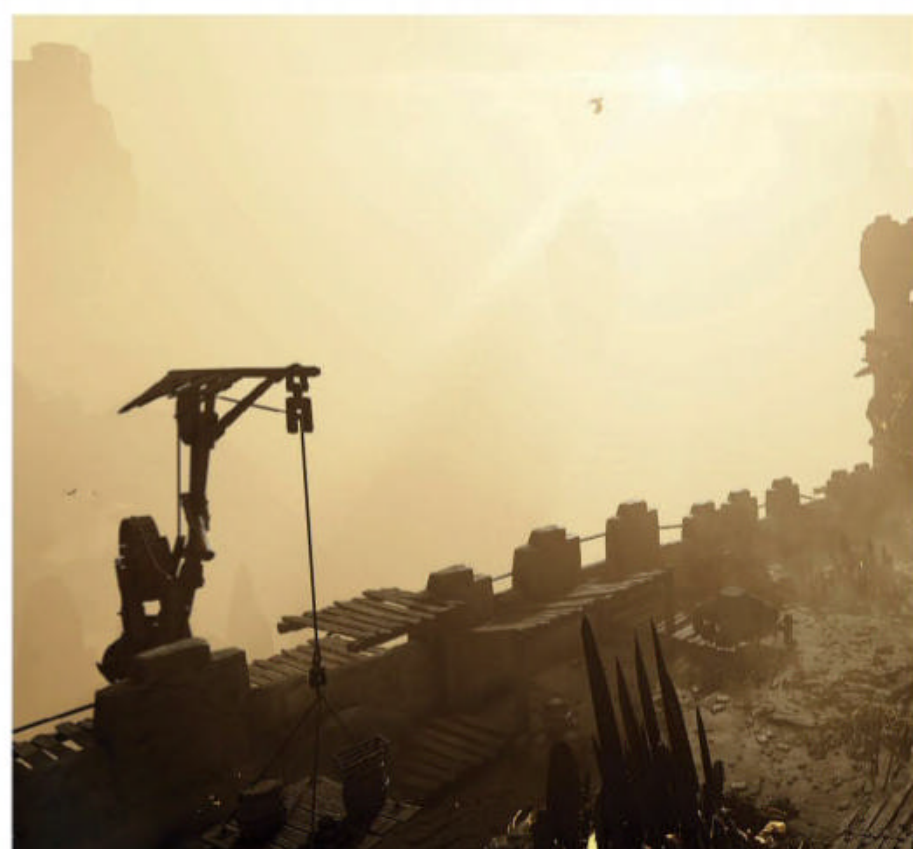
not something that will disable you, but it is something that will require you clear a path to get at them."

KNOW WHAT'S BEST

Creating more problems to throw at the players is something of a mantra for the Beastmen design. The Bestigor – the elite unit of the Beastmen – is a large, armoured brute that charges headlong into players. "What you have is a 250 kilo, huge-ass armoured goat with a halberd running at you and throwing your ass to the ground," enthuses Andersson. "And that really helps to create a separate combat loop for the Beastmen." Pleasingly, the Bestigor will also flatten any other enemy units that are standing between him and his target – something players can potentially use as a tactic. Bestigors have no chill.

Those are the standard units – what Fatshark calls the roaming set – but, as with Skaven and the Rotblood Tribe, the Beastmen are also bringing new specials and monster units. Take the beefcake on our cover, the Minotaur. "He's going

FATSHARK IS ALSO EXPERIMENTING WITH GIVING UNGORS BOWS



ABOVE: A typical Gold Wind level. Bring a pickaxe.

BELOW: Coincidentally, this is what I look like when I'm writing captions.



Warhammer Vermintide II: Winds of Magic



DAMN
I know they're hideous goatmen, but check out those gains! *Vermintide's* buffest faction is here.

to be the berserker version of a boss," says Andersson. "We have the Rat Ogre and Chaos Spawn and Bile Troll and Stormfiend, and they all have roles. What we don't have is a huge dual-wielding maniac that basically goes ham on you, so we're going to create that."

For the Beastmen special, Fatshark realised that a lone operative – similar to the Skaven's Packmaster or Gutter Runner – doesn't fit the personality of the faction. Instead, the team are trying something new: Standard Bearers, who place totems that buff nearby units. "The most straightforward thing we have now as a prototype is that he makes things invulnerable," says Andersson. "Because that's simple. We have many permutations, but that's what works best because it makes things super clear. You can control the guys, but you need someone to get at that thing and bring it down in order to succeed."

It's an interesting set of enemies. I fight against some in Fatshark's internal combat level – a stitched

together Frankenstein's monster of different chunks of *Vermintide's* maps. I can immediately tell the difference in the pace of combat. The spear Ungors are positioned at just the right distance to cause a problem, forcing you to deal with the immediate threat of the supporting Gorgs, before dodging forwards to get in a hit. And watching the bodies of smaller, frailer Beastmen get ragdolled by a Bestigor is as entertaining as advertised.

"We're making a co-op game, so we consciously try to minimise the complexity of enemies because you always have that co-op layer on top of it," says Andersson, summarising the overall design of the faction. "We could be doing way more complicated combos and more complicated solo gameplay, but in favour of making sure that you have enough time and space in your consciousness to keep tabs on your friends as well, we want to keep things super clear and super focused as well. So each enemy has one thing that it clearly brings to the table."

Fatshark is rounding out *Winds of Magic* with new difficulty levels – and an overall rebalancing of difficulty to greater incentivise co-op play – and new weapons that are designed to round out the combat abilities of each character. Saltzpyre's new billhook, for instance, fills out his melee options and lets him push a pack of enemies and then pull a single target back in. "That fits Saltzpyre as well because he's kind of a menacing, evil horrible person," explains Andersson.

THROWING DOWN

Kerillian's new sword and spear combo is designed with the Handmaiden career in mind, and swaps out her traditional glass cannon play style in favour of a more robust frontline role. Sienna is being given a flaming flail, because, in Andersson's words, "it's awesome". The most interesting new weapon, however, belongs to Bardin. "Basically Bardin needs ranged weapons and I want to experiment with throwing weapons," says Andersson. "So this is going to be the base blueprint for throwing stuff."

To an extent, it feels like Fatshark is taking a risk with *Winds of Magic*. The one thing they're not planning is a big library of new maps. Rather, this is an expansion designed to flesh out the *Vermintide II* experience in new directions – adding new ways to play with a potentially endless challenge. And it's just the beginning, too. During my visit, I'm shown the early workings of something that Fatshark isn't yet ready to announce. *Winds of Magic* may bring an endgame, but it's just the beginning. ■

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BREAKING

the

INTERNET

How a group of nobodies made **EVERQUEST**
and forever changed online gaming.

By Steven Messner

Y

ou don't know what success feels like until you've tanked the biggest internet pipeline into San Diego for a week minimum. Sure, most online games have network issues on day one, but in 1999

EverQuest wasn't just coughing out innocuous error codes. It was so popular that the internet provider hosting its servers had to physically run more cables to Los Angeles just to accommodate the tens of thousands of players dying to explore its cutting-edge 3D world.

"We used it all," laughs John Smedley, one of *EverQuest's* creators. "All of it. It was the largest internet connection into San Diego and it was constantly going down. It messed up internet here in San Diego for a good solid week."

During that seven-day nightmare, every corporation on that network had their online operations sabotaged by a bunch of nerds who'd somehow been given \$4.5 million dollars and a mission to create something extraordinary. And for its time *EverQuest* was nothing if not extraordinary.

It was a Saturday morning in February of 1996 when Brad McQuaid picked up the phone. The man on the other end introduced himself as John Smedley, an executive from Sony Interactive Studios America. As 27-year-old McQuaid struggled to comprehend what was happening, Smedley cut straight to the chase, “I have some good news and some bad news.”

Many months earlier, McQuaid and his friend Steve Clover had made a desperate attempt to realise a childhood dream. Since he was a kid playing *Ultima 2* on his school’s Apple IIe, all McQuaid wanted to do was make sprawling, inventive RPGs like Richard Garriott did with *Ultima*. Two decades and one half-finished university degree later, McQuaid and Clover were spending their days working in IT at a plant nursery before swapping floppy discs at the end of their shift and staying up all night programming a roleplaying game called *WarWizard 2*.

This sequel to their relatively unknown Amiga RPG was their pet project, but with no money to finish development and no publisher offering to fund it, *WarWizard 2* was doomed. Out of options and frustrated, they posted their half-complete prototype on the Usenet bulletin boards and hoped someone would take interest.

“The idea was that we’d throw it out there, put a cover letter and an intro to the game, and say that if you have any interest in this call my home number,” McQuaid tells me. “Steve was like, it can’t hurt. Let’s do it.”

Weeks went by. Then months. Not a single person called McQuaid about the demo. So you can imagine McQuaid was a little confused when Smedley told him that, despite thinking *WarWizard 2* was very impressive, he didn’t want to help finish it. That was the bad news, Smedley said. The good news was that he wanted to tackle something much more ambitious.

HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

The 1,993rd year of our lord was a different time for the internet. Napster wouldn’t piss off Metallica for another seven years, no one found joy in a creepy 3D dancing baby, and the entire metastructure of networks we call the internet was just one of several online services competing to connect corporations and computer nerds. If you’ve ever looked at your internet bill and grumbled about the extortionate monthly fee, Smedley has a sharp reminder for you – that shit used to be charged *by the hour*.

“AT THAT TIME THE INDUSTRY WAS SO SMALL, SO I HAD TO FIND JUST THE RIGHT PEOPLE”

Despite how arcane online services were back then, Smedley knew they were the future. In 1993 he started playing *CyberStrike*, a primitive 16-player mech game that was in the vanguard of 3D multiplayer gaming. “It got me hooked on online games in a big way,” Smedley says. Though *CyberStrike* cost an eye-watering six dollars an hour to play, the idea that 16 people from across the world could compete in a virtual arena was revolutionary. *Computer Gaming World* awarded its first-ever Online Game of the Year award to *CyberStrike*. Three years and many painful billing cycles later, Smedley was working at Sony Interactive Studios America (SISA) making sports games for the PlayStation. But he really wanted to make an online game like *CyberStrike*.

Unbelievably, SISA executives bought into Smedley’s dream and gave him a few million dollars and their blessing to start a PC development team in a company dominated by console games and

college sports fanatics. “So I went out into the shareware world looking for people who were fairly close by,” Smedley says. “At that time the industry was so small, so I had to find just the right people.”

The right people, it turns out, were Brad McQuaid and Steve Clover. “When I found Brad and Steve’s demo online and contacted him, we immediately meshed well and he had a great creative vision,” Smedley tells me. “The only thing was that Brad didn’t know how to make a professional videogame, but I had that experience.”

McQuaid jokes and says he didn’t have the money to play the graphical online games that Smedley loved, but he and Clover saw the future in a very different kind of multiplayer game. Called MUDs (Multi-User Dungeons), what these text-based



RAPID EXPANSION There are a whopping 25 expansions (and counting!) for EverQuest





multiplayer roleplaying games lacked in fancy graphics they made up for in depth and scale. Similar to traditional pen and paper roleplaying games, players could socialise and explore virtual fantasy worlds together – only everything was described through text. “They were mostly played by kids in colleges who could telnet into the college mainframe or minicomputer. I don’t know how they didn’t get kicked out of school because they were just playing nonstop,” McQuaid says.

When Smedley said he wanted this game to be cutting edge, McQuaid saw an opportunity to do something completely unheard of – a MUD with 3D graphics. Two days after that phone call he and Clover resigned from their IT jobs and joined SISA. “It was an opportunity we could not pass up,” McQuaid says.

“It was an amazing, life-changing day for sure. I felt absolute excitement.”

What McQuaid lacked in professional game development experience, he made up for in project management knowhow, extensive programming skills, and raw creative vision. The two dreamed up an outline for a graphical MUD and

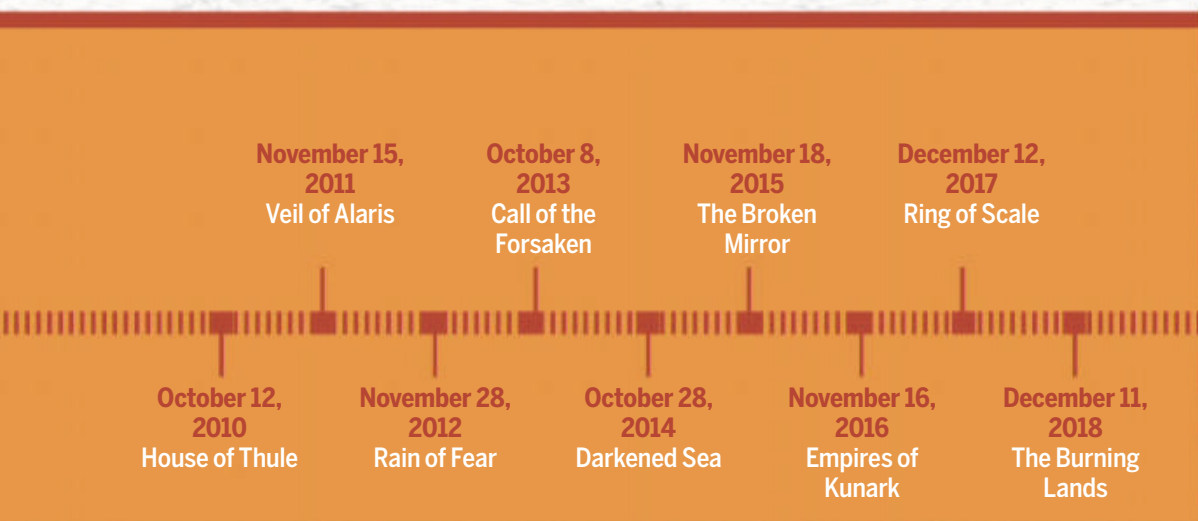
TOP: *EverQuest*'s look was inspired by fantasy book covers from the '90s.

LEFT: New zones are being added for the 20th anniversary.

created a 20-page design document to act as their bible. In that document, McQuaid and Clover cemented the foundation of its systems, like class-based combat, an emphasis on player-versus-environment exploration, and the basic layout of a high-fantasy world that became known as Norrath. Clover gave it a name: *EverQuest*.

LOSERS' CLUB

McQuaid and Clover were a good start, but they couldn't build an entire 3D game on their own. As months ticked by and development on *EverQuest* scaled up, it was becoming increasingly obvious that no one outside of the development team had any faith in Smedley and McQuaid. “We reached out to people in the industry at that time who were working on these pay-by-the-hour type games,” McQuaid says. “We wanted to bring those people in



because they were the veterans of the day – they had the most commercial online experience. They laughed at us and said we were crazy.”

It wasn't that *EverQuest* wanted to be a multiplayer roleplaying game. There were dozens of those. And it wasn't that *EverQuest* would sport state-of-the-art graphics. It was that McQuaid wanted to combine the two in a massive open world that thousands of players could populate at any one time *and* charge a monthly fee for it. “John was convinced that it was obvious that these pay-by-the-hour games were limited because you had to have a lot of money to play, but we couldn't make it free like a MUD so that's where the subscription model came up,” McQuaid says. “People thought it was a crazy idea.”

With no veterans taking them seriously, McQuaid posted job openings at nearby colleges. One of the level designers was a pizza delivery guy who got the job based on enthusiasm alone.

Wanting to repay a favour to two amateur artists who helped him with *WarWizard 2*, McQuaid phoned up Bill Trost and Kevin Burns. Because they had no real background in professional art, the pair joined at Sony as testers to get their foot in the door and worked after hours designing mockups and art assets

before Smedley was able to bring them on full-time. Meanwhile Rosie Rappaport, an artist, worked in the same bullpen as McQuaid and the team, and once she found out what they were doing she asked to join the project. Trost and Rappaport would become key ingredients in *EverQuest*'s success.

Most of the people at Sony were just as sceptical as the industry veterans Smedley tried to recruit. Rappaport says other developers at SISA took to calling the game “NeverQuest” while Smedley adds that the team was mockingly referred to as the “Ghouls and Goblins Guys” when they'd gather to play *Magic: The Gathering* in the lunchroom. “This was a studio that was filled with sports people,” Smedley laughs. “And then this small group of us that was into *Dungeons and Dragons*.”

EverQuest was so audacious, even Smedley's boss was a little embarrassed by it. Sony, like many Japanese tech companies with American branches, was a hydra with

BOTTOM: *The Planes of Power* expansion was a favourite of hardcore players.



WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

Moving to greener pastures



BRAD MCQUAID PRODUCER

After leaving Sony Online Entertainment in 2002, Brad continued developing new MMOs. He is currently working on *Pantheon: Rise of the Fallen*, an MMO that aims to revitalise the genre by rekindling what made it special in the first place: social and complex systems.



JOHN SMEDLEY PRESIDENT

John became the president of Sony Online Entertainment (now Daybreak Games) until 2015 when he resigned. After a brief stint working on indie games, John is now working at Amazon Game Studios on an unannounced project.



BILL TROST LEAD DESIGNER

After *EverQuest*'s launch, Bill led development on several *EverQuest* expansions, *EverQuest 2*, and several other games before jumping ship to Trion Worlds to work on another MMO. He's now at Amazon Game Studios working with John.



ROSIE RAPPAPORT LEAD ARTIST

Aside from a brief departure, Rosie stayed at Sony Online Entertainment (now Daybreak Games) until 2016 working on various MMOs. She's now an adjunct professor at the Art Institute of San Diego and is working on a secret project with developer Secret Society Games.



ANDREW SITES ASSISTANT PRODUCER

Aside from a brief stint at Zynga, Andrew has stayed at Sony Online Entertainment working in a variety of roles across several games. He is now the executive producer on the *Planetside 2* franchise and is growing a big beard as he works on *Planetside Arena*.

“THEY LAUGHED AT US AND SAID WE WERE CRAZY”





LEFT: Keith Parkinson created most of *EverQuest*'s early art.

heads prone to biting each other. Smedley's hardest challenge was keeping *EverQuest* away from the teeth of upper management. "My boss at the time, Kelly Flock, he didn't even want to admit that he was doing this game to the Japanese management team who had no idea we were making this game," Smedley laughs. "It was kept very quiet."

"I was having to protect the development of *EverQuest* and it was pretty difficult," Smedley adds. "They actively laughed at it and thought we were wasting money. In meetings I

was constantly having to justify why we were doing it."

That's how *EverQuest* first came to life, in the bullpen of a PlayStation studio where everyone was either ignorant of its existence or convinced that the bizarre high-fantasy RPG would fail. As Smedley would later realise, it was the perfect place.

ORIGIN STORY

EverQuest's development team had absolutely no idea how to build a massively multiplayer online game, which sounds like a bad thing. It

turned out the opposite was true. "We had no idea of what could or couldn't be done," McQuaid says. "That was the key, though. We didn't have any veterans in there that said 'no you can't do that, that's too ambitious'. We were like, this is what we're going to create, and we're going to go for it, and we're going to make it work, and we're going to keep trying until it all comes together."

As development ramped up, the team also expanded and the initial members were all promoted. McQuaid became *EverQuest*'s producer, Clover its lead programmer, Rappaport its lead artist, and Trost its lead designer. Their first mission was to build a working prototype of a multiplayer dungeon for a party to run around in. As *EverQuest* was coming to life in a technical sense, Bill Trost was bringing it to life in a very different way.

Like most of the team, Trost had grown up going on imaginary adventures with his friends in *Dungeons and Dragons*. But Trost was a natural-born dungeon master. He lived to create worlds – and the rough narrative outline detailed in *EverQuest*'s 20-page design bible wasn't going to cut it. "No one had articulated there was a need for *EverQuest* to have a lot of lore," Trost laughs. "It was just something that, coming into it as a dungeon master, I was like, 'ugh, if we're going to have people play this game we need to figure all this stuff out'."

McQuaid and Clover had mapped out a rough sketch of *EverQuest*'s continents and the various races who resided there. Trost took those seeds and cultivated a garden. When he wasn't building art assets or helping design the user interface, he was dreaming up Norrath's pantheon of deities, penning the histories of its people, and moulding a vast army of non-player characters that would populate the world. But much of the work had already been done.

"A lot of what became the world of Norrath and *EverQuest*, I used from my *Dungeons and Dragons* campaign as a kid," Trost says. That included *EverQuest* characters like Mayong Mistmoore, a conniving spymaster and elf who would become Norrath's first vampire. He was actually Trost's primary *D&D* character.

Meanwhile Rappaport was bringing *EverQuest*'s aesthetic to life in much the same way. "The high



FEATURE

EverQuest

✦ fantasy at the time was coming from different book covers or from Frank Frazetta, who was everybody's hero," Rappaport says. "But I wanted something more whimsical and lighthearted for the characters. We talked about making the really ugly characters have more comedy to them, like the goblins having a visible butt-crack that they'd itch. I didn't want anything to be grey because at the time roleplaying games were brown and grey, everything was wood and stone. I wanted everything to have more colour and personality, because colour is another voice that creates a story."

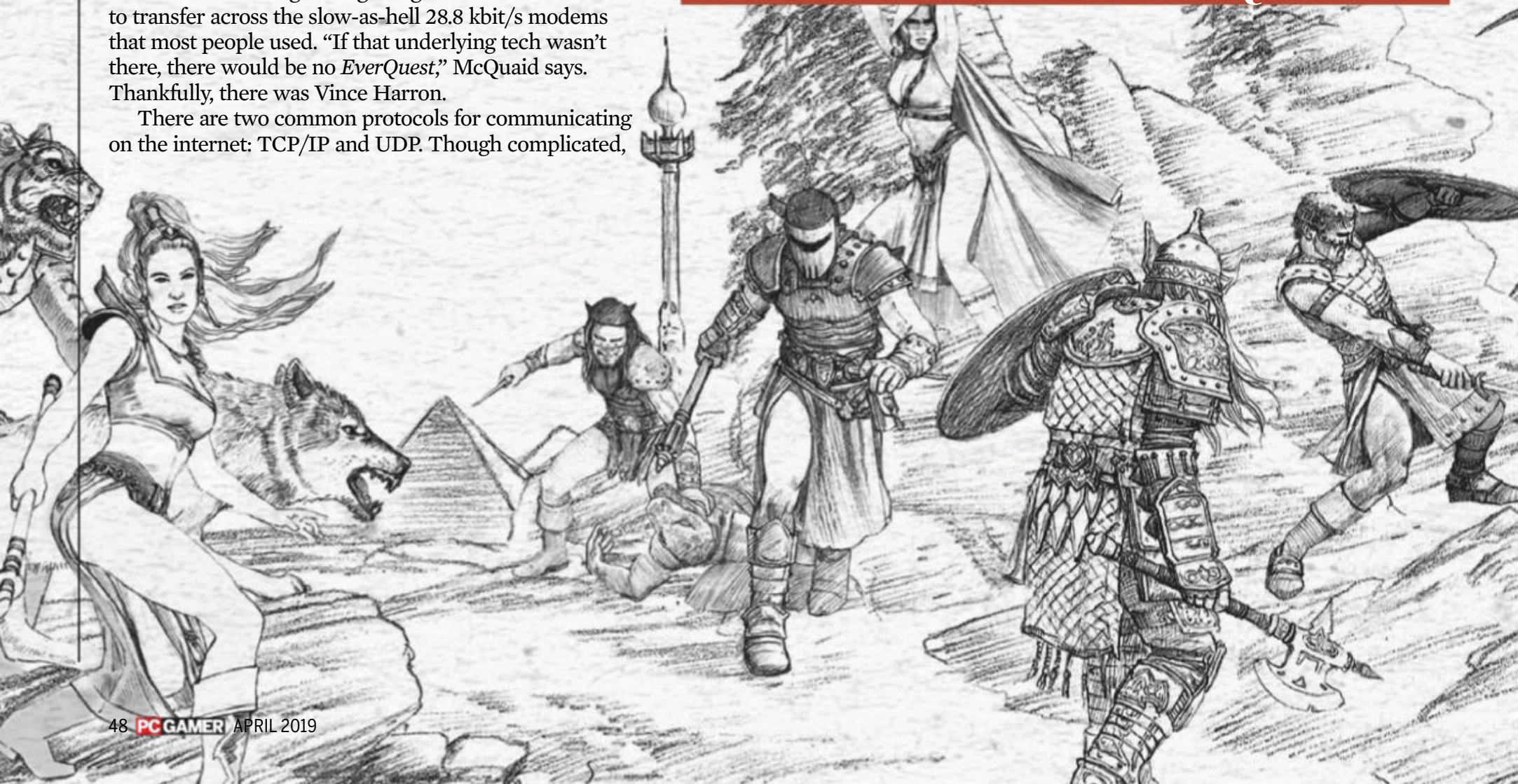
Though not everyone liked that light-hearted aesthetic, Trost also wasn't a fan of overly serious fantasy. The two worked closely to dream up quirky twists on fantasy staples and pulled inspiration from the most unlikely of sources. Like any true Californian, Rappaport and Trost were fans of alt rock band Blind Melon. After seeing their music video for *No Rain* in which a little girl prances around in a bee costume, they had the idea for one of *EverQuest*'s most iconic creatures, the Bixie – one part bumble bee and one part mischievous pixie. "That was just Bill and I shooting the shit and wanting to create colourful creatures that would make the world more fun and interesting," Rappaport laughs.

McQuaid, Clover and the rest of *EverQuest*'s programmers were tackling very different kinds of problems. *EverQuest* wasn't just ambitious in its use of groundbreaking 3D technology, but also the scope of its world and combat. McQuaid envisioned 14 classes and 12 races that players could combine to create their avatar. But the real challenge was getting all of that information to transfer across the slow-as-hell 28.8 kbit/s modems that most people used. "If that underlying tech wasn't there, there would be no *EverQuest*," McQuaid says. Thankfully, there was Vince Harron.

There are two common protocols for communicating on the internet: TCP/IP and UDP. Though complicated,



“IF THAT UNDERLYING TECH WASN'T THERE, THERE WOULD BE NO EVERQUEST”



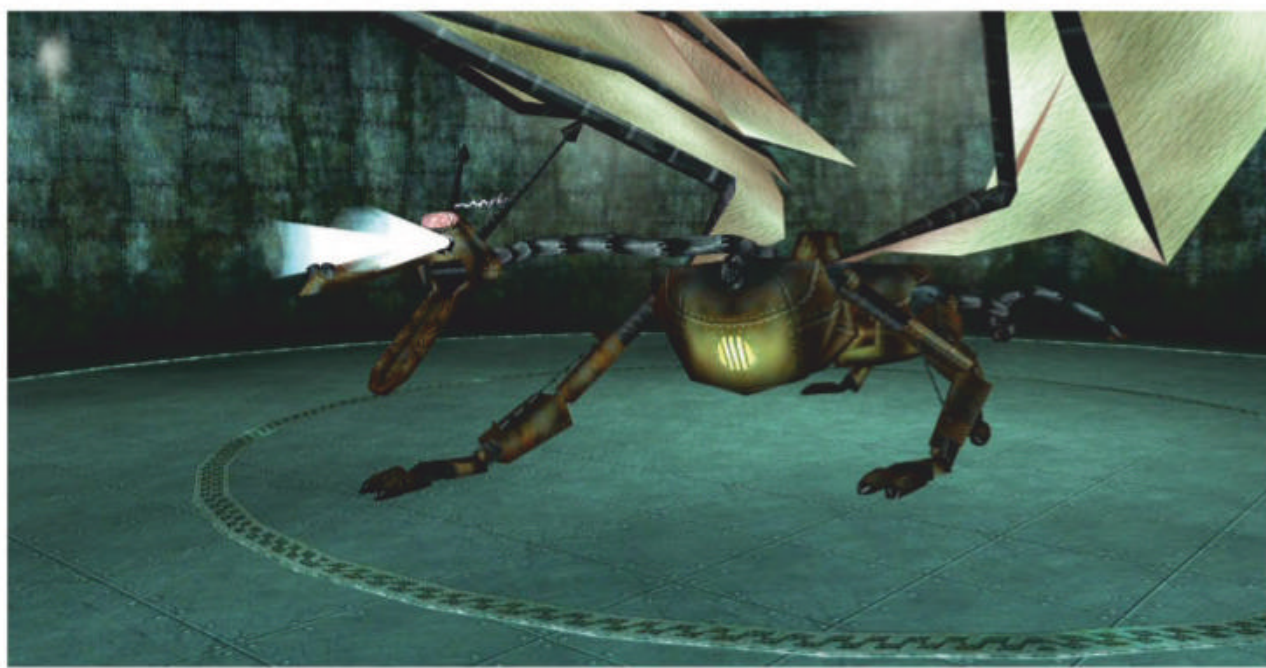


the gist is that the former is slow but stable and will send packets of information with delivery confirmation notices. If a packet goes missing, TCP/IP will send a new one. UDP is much faster but couldn't care less if packets arrived at their destination. "Vince, who is a brilliant programmer, came in and wrote what we ended up calling Reliable UDP," McQuaid says.

It was a protocol that let *EverQuest* determine when to send reliable or unreliable data. "When you're running around and you're updating the server with your character's location," McQuaid explains, "that was usually sent unreliably because if there was a lost packet it was no big deal. Those packets were being sent out often because everyone is constantly running around. But if it was something like trading an item, we sent that reliably. That was a critical piece of technology that most people aren't even aware of. And Vince is an unsung hero because he was down there in the trenches working on this network code."

NO FAITH

All throughout its development, Smedley was working to keep



SYSTEM REQUIREMENTS

Can you handle it?

MINIMUM

- Windows 95/98
- Pentium 166+
- 32MB RAM
- Direct3D or Glide compliant accelerator card w/ 4MB RAM
- 500MB Hard drive space
- 28.8k+ internet connection
- Windows compatible sound card
- Microsoft compatible mouse
- 6x CD Rom drive

RECOMMENDED

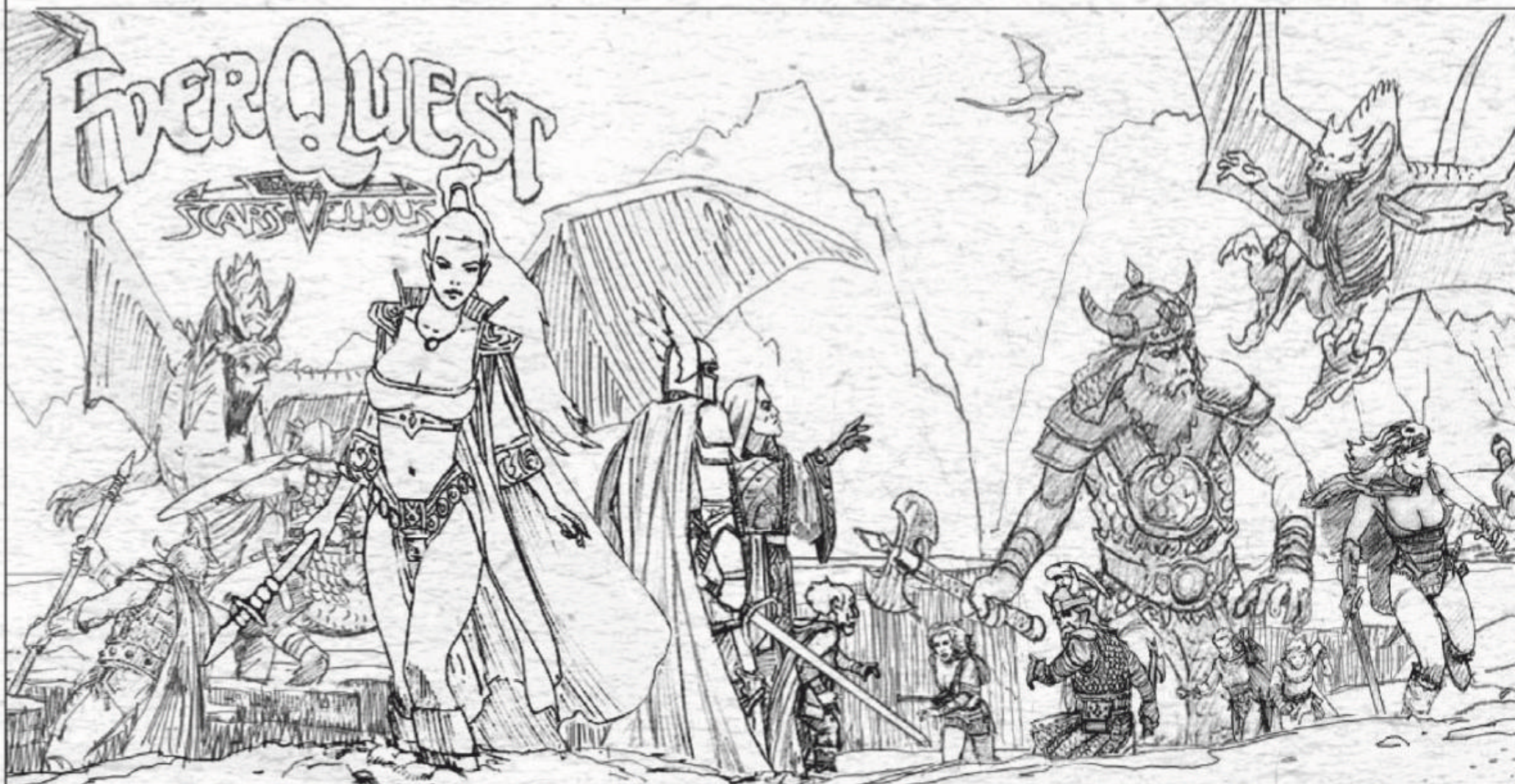
- Pentium 200+
- 64MB RAM

EverQuest a secret. "It was exactly the right incubator," Smedley says. "There was a lack of attention focused on us, but that same lack of attention gave us room to breathe life into what would become *EverQuest*. There was not a shred of interest from one executive period. Not one of them looked at it a single time."

Over two years passed while *EverQuest*'s team of roughly two dozen developers worked day and night to make their dream come true. When Trost says that people were sleeping under their desks at night, I mistake it for hyperbole. But then Rappaport says the same thing. "That was the hardest that I've worked on any game," she admits. "There was a ton of overtime, and we were just

TOP: When you've run out of expansion ideas, there's always the moon.

ABOVE: Xanamech Nezmirthafen is tough to both fight and spell.



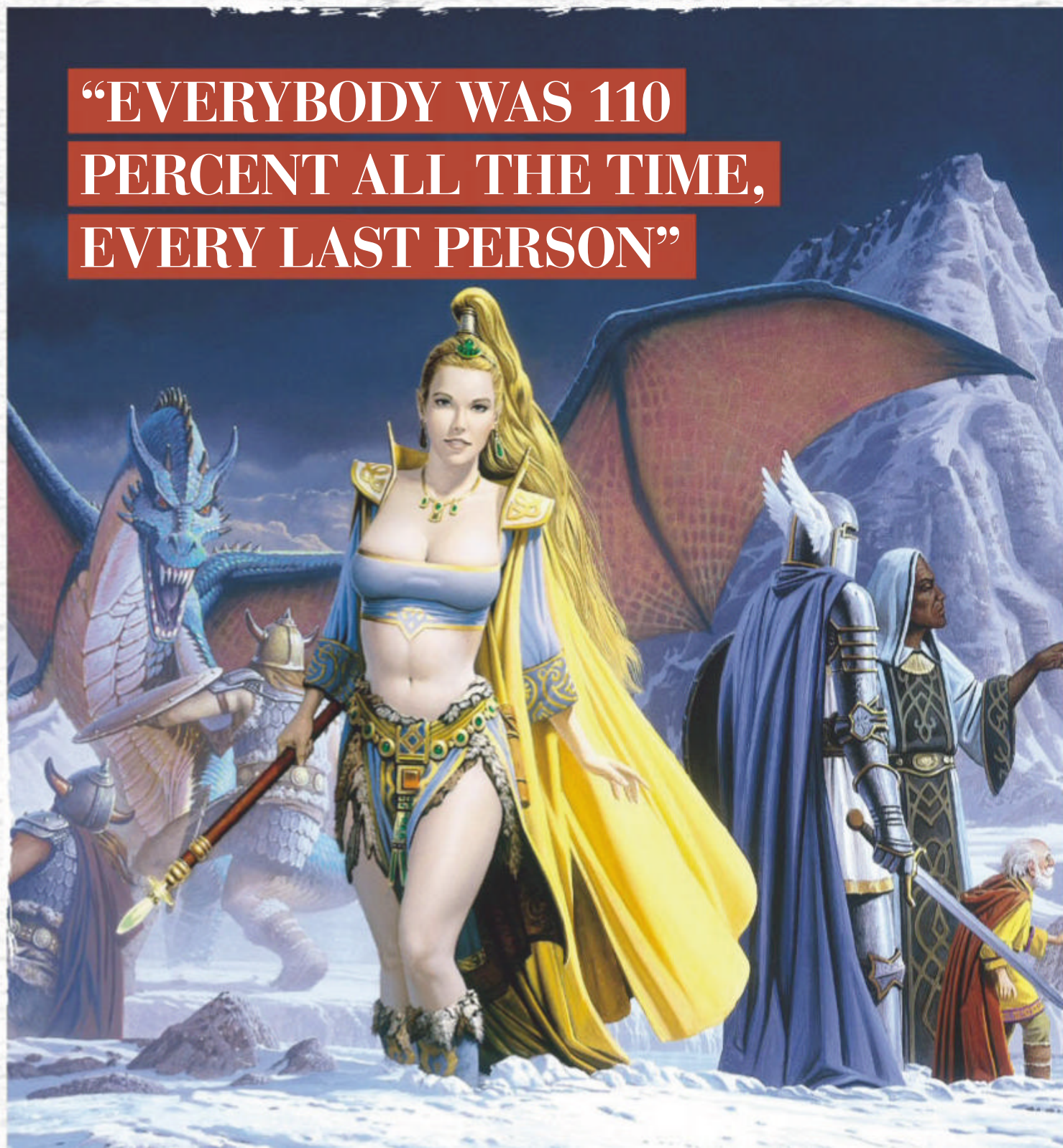
» always there and sleeping under our desks and going home at 2am night after night. I remember one time I took a Saturday off and I was like ‘oh, this is what weekends are’. I’d forgotten. It was a culture of do or die. There was nobody on the team that was just doing it halfway. Everybody was 110 percent all the time, every last person.”

McQuaid says it took almost two years before he started to think that *EverQuest* might actually work. “We knew that these MUDs were extremely compelling,” he says. “But the big question was whether we were just a strange microcosm of people that like this kind of game or is this something that could be commercially viable.”

It was at the Game Developers Conference in Long Beach, California that McQuaid finally realised *EverQuest* might be successful. It was the spring of 1998 and the *EverQuest* team was there to demo the fledgling MMO in hopes of getting some valuable feedback. “We set up eight or ten computers in two rows and we allowed people to come up and create a level one character and just run around, figure out the game, kill stuff, and talk to people.”

To give everyone a chance, players could play for just 20 minutes before they’d have to log out and let someone else try. But “a lot of them would leave one computer and sneak around to the other side and log into

“EVERYBODY WAS 110 PERCENT ALL THE TIME, EVERY LAST PERSON”



their account and continue playing their character” McQuaid noticed. “We had to constantly police and pull people away from *EverQuest* so that other people could experience it. And some people even got a little belligerent. When you’re prying people away from your own game that you’re trying to demo, that’s a good sign.”

Richard Garriott’s groundbreaking MMO, *Ultima Online*, had also launched a year earlier and proven that online RPGs with monthly subscriptions could be profitable. Interest in online gaming was surging as *EverQuest* inched closer to release.

And then Sony’s upper management found out about Smedley’s little secret.

With the constant mergers and restructuring of Sony’s various corporate divisions in the late ’90s, it was more like a barbarian horde than a Roman legion – a loose assemblage of tribes that, more often than not, devoured each other.

What you need to know is that at some point, Sony Interactive Studios of America became 989 Studios and then, some time after, shifted focus towards developing PlayStation 2 games in anticipation of the console’s launch. For over two years Smedley had been running interference and doing his best to keep *EverQuest* a secret.

Somewhere in that corporate shuffle Smedley’s passion project

was discovered by Japanese upper management.

That was when Kelly Flock, Smedley’s boss, gave him his own dose of good news and bad news. “Kelly just didn’t have the backing from Tokyo to launch a PC business,” Smedley explains. “But he did have the backing to let us go out and look for corporate suitors.”

It was a bittersweet moment. Sony had put enough money into *EverQuest* that they didn’t want to can the project, but they weren’t going to continue feeding it, either. Despite trying to hide it from his own bosses, Flock believed that *EverQuest* had potential, so he had arranged a deal – Smedley and his team could continue to work on *EverQuest* as a partially-independent studio, but they would need to find another corporate investor to split the bill.

Though a Microsoft offer was on the table ready to be signed Smedley ultimately found a corporate suitor in a different Sony company called Sony Online Entertainment. The *EverQuest* team formed their own company,

BELOW: Fantasy: where it’s never too cold for a revealing leather onesie.

MEET YOUR IDOLS

Crossing paths with Lord British



During *EverQuest*’s development, McQuaid had the surreal opportunity meet his hero and inspiration, Richard Garriott, and show him the game. McQuaid has a picture that he still keeps nearby. “That was just an amazing moment, sitting down with him,” McQuaid says. “He’s the nicest guy in the world too. He checked out *EverQuest* and played it for a while and was asking questions. It was a mind-blowing day. I can check that off my bucket list.”

Today, years later, McQuaid and Garriott are good friends.



called Verant Interactive, and moved to a different office building just a short walk away. It was a close call – not that anyone on the team knew it. “After *EverQuest* had shipped, John told me that it was almost cancelled five or six times,” McQuaid says. “He never told me at the time and I’m glad he didn’t.”

“I knew that something was happening,” Rappaport says. “We were getting new business cards, but I just rolled my eyes and thought it was something for the executives to deal with.”

Ignorant of the bureaucracy that almost killed it, *EverQuest*’s team thundered along toward its official release in March of 1999 relatively unscathed. Unable to match their initial scope for Norrath, continents and a few features were trimmed from the original release, but *EverQuest* was a near-perfect manifestation of McQuaid’s and Clover’s original vision.

“Almost everything in that original design doc made its way into the game,” Smedley boasts. “It was very impressive. I’m almost 30 years into this business and I haven’t seen that another time, ever.”

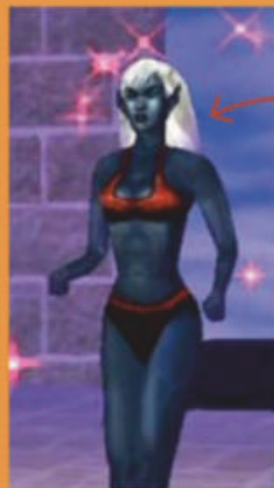
LAUNCH DAY WOES

After running the gauntlet for three years together, no one at Verant Interactive doubted that *EverQuest* would be good. What they never expected, though, was how successful it would be. At the time,

MODEL CITIZENS

Spot the similarities

When designing the female versions of *EverQuest*’s playable races, Rosie Rappaport says she sometimes took inspiration from real-world supermodels. “I liked creating these beautiful female characters, and for a lot of them I chose different supermodels at the time,” she says. The two that she distinctly remembers: using Salma Hayek’s likeness for wood elves and Tyra Banks for dark elves. Can you see the resemblance?



only *Ultima Online* offered insight into the new world of commercial online RPGs. By the time *EverQuest* launched, *Ultima Online* had shattered expectations and sold 120,000 copies. But *EverQuest* was a cutting-edge game that required a computer with a 3D graphics card, a somewhat novel piece of hardware in 1999. The team would be excited if it sold even a quarter as many copies.

Instead, *EverQuest* sold 10,000 on its first day. No one was prepared.

Andrew Sites, an assistant producer, remembers getting phone calls from friends telling him that *EverQuest* players were lined up out the door at retailers hoping to buy a copy. That was his first clue that *EverQuest*’s servers were about to be destroyed by a flood of eager players. “You have to understand things were way different to how this stuff works

now, where we have all these fancy administration tools and everything,” Sites says. “At the time, we had a datacentre and all the servers were like desktop PCs and they were in these racks, and we had to cram as many as we could in there because you had to pay for more space. We found if you pulled the little rubber feet off the bottom you could squeeze in one more row of PCs, which were the *EverQuest* worlds at the time. There was no remote administration hardware, it was literally 144 serial cables to each of the worlds connected to one PC with a switch box and a monitor.”

When *EverQuest*’s servers first went live, they crashed. To keep it online, three employees would sit in that freezing cold network room wearing parkas and manually reboot the servers. “Keeping that game up when you didn’t know what you were doing, which we didn’t, was very hard,” Smedley says. “Back then there was no one with launch experience. We were just making it up as we went along.”

Few, if anyone, could reliably play *EverQuest* that day. Smedley, Sites, and the networking team were left scratching their heads until they finally discovered the source of the problem. “One of our network programmers had done his math wrong and it meant we were using eight times more bandwidth than we thought we were,” Smedley laughs.

EverQuest was using a network managed by a local service provider called UUnet, also used by several major San Diego corporations. But demand for *EverQuest* was so much greater than Verant Interactive had planned for that it was exceeding the physical limits of the internet pipeline into San Diego. As a result, not only could thousands of players not explore Norrath, several massive corporations had their networking operations accidentally sabotaged. “Once you go over the limit, it

BELOW: Naturally, *EverQuest* contains a lot of dragons. Too many, even.





EverQuest's visual style has changed significantly over its 20 years.

basically boots everyone off the network," Sites explains.

Days ticked by as Smedley and crew desperately tried to assuage the growing frustrations of their players and negotiate for better internet access, but UUnet would have to physically lay more cable between San Diego and Los Angeles first. That would take weeks. Meanwhile, a rotating team of three parka-wearing employees took eight-hour shifts rebooting crashed servers for days on end. Fortunately UUnet was able to reroute traffic and free up bandwidth as an interim solution while they expanded their physical pipeline, and

more engaging than its tedious grind. "We created this vehicle for people to come together," Rappaport says. "But the community really created the game themselves. They are the ones that made it what it was."

"I think part of it is just being in the right place at the right time, but I also think that Brad really tapped into such a pure Dungeons and Dragons-style experience that it really resonated," Smedley says.

Overnight, McQuaid and his team became celebrities not just to their fans but in the gaming industry at large. At its height in 2004 *EverQuest* had sold over 3 million copies and

Entertainment, forming an entirely new PC games division under Smedley's rule. It was a triumphant moment for the "Ghouls and Goblins Guys" but there are no hard feelings about it. "I have to give Sony credit," McQuaid says. "They never really threw us to the kerb. They paid for half the funding of the game, even if they were always hedging their bet. It was definitely vindicating, but when I think back, if it wasn't for Sony and the different executives there at the time, and John running interference and protecting the game, then there wouldn't have been an *EverQuest*."

But back then, no one was really thinking about it. Sure they had achieved what seemed impossible, but Bill Trost and the other developers had pages filled with notes of new continents and stories that didn't make it into the initial launch to think about instead. There was always more work to do. "We didn't take a lot of time to dwell on it," Trost laughs. "We just divvied up resources and started working on the expansion." ■

EVERQUEST SOLD 10,000 ON ITS FIRST DAY. NO ONE WAS PREPARED

players were finally reliably able to explore Norrath for the first time.

Despite how painful that initial week was, people quickly forgot. *EverQuest* was revolutionary. By April, *EverQuest* had sold 60,000 copies. Six months later – 225,000 copies, doubling *Ultima Online*'s already record-breaking numbers in half the time. Though brutally punishing and complex, *EverQuest*'s blend of whimsical fantasy, gruelling adventure, and gorgeous graphics encouraged players to bond and form online relationships that became

had released a whopping eight expansions (another 17 would follow in the decades after). Blizzard Entertainment President J. Allen Brack would later admit that "[*World of Warcraft*] took a lot of great ideas from *EverQuest*" and that "*EverQuest* is the big foundation for WoW". And even today's MMOs still follow the blueprints of class and world design that *EverQuest* canonised.

Sony, quickly realising that *EverQuest* wasn't doomed, re-acquired Verant Interactive and merged it with Sony Online



Eric Holmes Steven Hall & Lars Gustavsson

The process behind **BATTLEFIELD V**'s campaign. *By Xavier Nelson Jr.*

I spoke to some of the lead developers of the *Battlefield V* campaign about the process of its creation, their goals with various sections of the anthology, their thoughts on audience reactions, and the potential future of single-player campaigns in the *Battlefield* series. Also – the weird little song in Under No Flag was improvised?!

PROFILES

Battlefield V's campaign leads have worked on properties including the *Batman: Arkham* series, *Doctor Who*, and *Battlefield: Bad Company*, respectively.



ERIC HOLMES
Design Director,
Battlefield V



STEVEN HALL
Lead Writer,
Battlefield V



LARS GUSTAVSSON
Creative Director,
Battlefield V

Coming away from the well-received vignette structure of *Battlefield 1*, what storytelling traits did you want to carry forward into *Battlefield V*?

Eric: I think what we found was a way to weave a story and gameplay in a way to emotionally reach the player. It might sound obvious, but that was our biggest takeaway. *Battlefield* has always had spectacular, high-agency experiences. But the 'feels' were new to the series. That was what we wanted to build on most.

***Battlefield V* often uses mechanical progression and spatial design to directly strengthen the narrative of a given campaign. What did the partnership between narrative and gameplay teams look like behind the scenes? How much did this workflow allow for iteration?**

Eric: We break each story into roughly 15-minute sections, with a story map guiding us to what each is about, both for narrative and gameplay. When it was best, we were collaborating on experiences to blend gameplay and narrative together.

Usually, there were great ideas that would appear during development of those pieces – for example, the ad-hoc off-key song with Bridger and Mason toward the end of Under No Flag. You have to be playing the game to come up with ideas as to what would make it sing.

Another example would be the DICE animation team having us chase the document satchel in the storm in Nordlys. I can't even tell you whose idea that was, but it was a great moment.

How much do multiplayer considerations (including environment reuse, weapon

balancing, etc) affect the singleplayer design of a *Battlefield* campaign? As the game's multiplayer portion updates over time, are there dependent factors in the singleplayer portion that require adjustment as well?

Eric: Oh, so very much. You'll notice the health system is different to multiplayer. In MP this relies on health packs from allies. But in the War Stories there aren't always friends nearby. The philosophy behind this is key – multiplayer is about fairness and balance. But singleplayer is usually about a dominant player, since a K:D of 1:1 vs AI just isn't very fun. Thankfully the weapon feel in *BFV* is a real strength. Those are pretty much 1:1, although the damage vs AI makes them more deadly than in MP.

Replayability is embedded into the campaign of *Battlefield V*, from standard collectible items to bespoke challenges that require players to

BELOW: Warming yourself in a Nordlys survival scenario.





**“WE HAVE A
DIVERSE
AUDIENCE OF
DIFFERENT
PLAYER TYPES”**

» approach the same level in different ways to unlock unique rewards. What wider design goals does this serve?

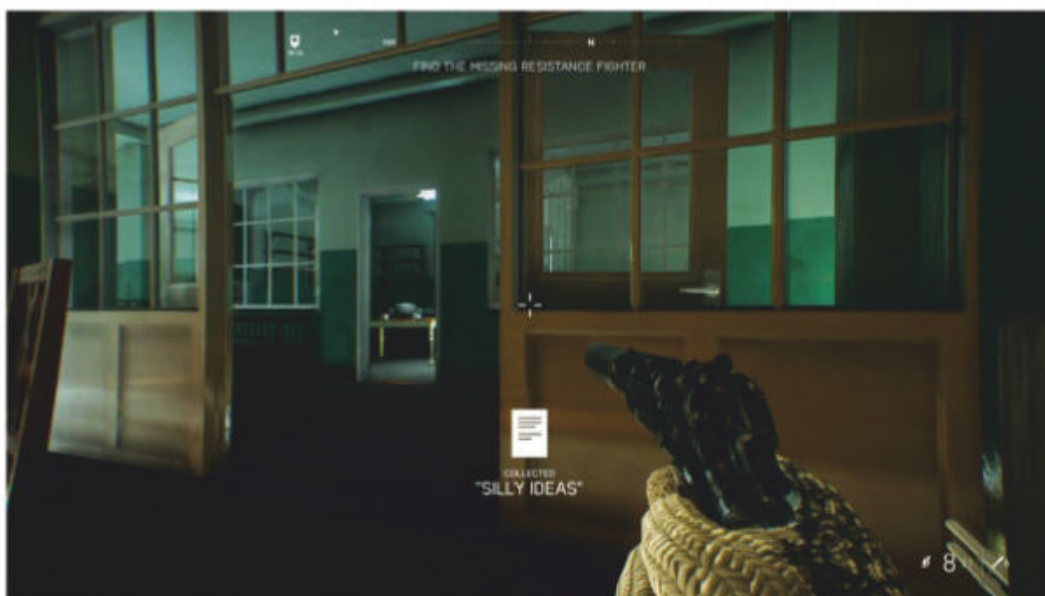
Eric: There are many types of players out there. Some don't give two hoots about collectibles. But there are explorers and completionists who *must* go everywhere and get everything. The collectibles are principally for them. The payoff is somewhat simple – our letters – but we hoped they would give a little more life and depth to our world. Nothing revolutionary there.

To also occasionally pair up the collectible with a uniquely placed tool allows players of all types to find new ways of approaching the encounter at hand, thus broadening the attraction to go looking for these collectibles.

The challenges are about more than just replay value. They build player familiarity with the weapons and vehicles of the core game. Our hope was players who engage with them find themselves building skill for that inevitable confrontation in multiplayer.

The writing in the campaigns, from the Guy Ritchie-esque comedy in *Under No Flag* to *Tirailleur*'s retrospective structure, seems particularly sharp this time around. How did your teams approach the writing for *Battlefield V*? Did you make any major changes compared to *Battlefield 1*? I imagine capturing concepts traditionally associated with World War II, like heroism or brotherhood, is difficult without straying into what have become clichés.

BELOW: Lars Gustavsson is a *Battlefield* veteran, starting in 2002.



ABOVE: Sneaking through a Nazi heavy water plant.

Eric: Thanks for the kind words! I will pass them on to Steven Hall, our lead writer on both this game and *Battlefield 1*. Steven is the real hero here – he was the guide through the emotional journey and often dangerous ground.

One guideline we started in *BF1* was to “let the era speak”. I think that led to a lot of interesting choices as to what and how to depict certain things. For example, I think we at DICE are all very proud of what the prologue invoked. The Second World War is a different beast from the first. Faster. Broader. Bigger. More dynamic. That informed our prologue for *Battlefield V*, for example. But the Second World War also has a special type of darkness that is unique to that setting. And we knew we had to confront and acknowledge that somehow.

Another differentiator was new additions to the cinematic team, for example, our director Pelle Hallert. Our cinematic directors on *BF1* were Markus Kryler and Fredrik Akerstrom – a phenomenal double-team. But for this title, they were already booked on another project. So we looked far and wide to find someone who could match them, but not imitate them. After an exhaustive search, we found we had the chance to work with Pelle. His style is his own, and I think that helped to differentiate the two just by his eye and hand being his own. He has an extensive history in TV – check out *Jordskott* – for which I believe he was the director of photography.

Meanwhile, in gameplay, we have Justin Langley working across each story providing a barrage of VO for countless events to bring our story into gameplay. Justin is a pro that knows game VO like nobody else – check out his game credits on Mobygames. He and his team pore over the game to squeeze in story anywhere they can.

There are so many contributors to the final result that I wish I could name them all. Collaborating from the structure, writing for gameplay and scenes and placing each event is a real team effort driven by a group of passionate, talented professionals.

Steven: WWII is a very familiar war, compared to WWI, so we were very aware from day one that whatever we did needed to work a little harder to find an identity of its own. From a writing perspective, I tried to vary the tone and narrative structure of these War Stories more than those in *BF1*, to give each one a distinct voice and identity. And much like he did in *BF1*, Eric brought a whole armful of WWII conflicts, battles, and events to the table that I hadn't even been aware of. So between us, we started to find some interesting things. It's a team effort as always,





ABOVE: The Under No Flag campaign has an abundance of tactical options.

LEFT: Skiing down slopes in one of the signature levels of the Nordlys campaign.

so many people brought interesting ideas and scenarios and suggestions. Sitting down as a team, it took us quite a while to settle on a final four!

The subject matter tackled by the *Battlefield V* campaigns tends to be nuanced, heavy material. Tirailleux discusses the erasure of people of colour, Nordlys showcases a struggle between duty and love in a maternal relationship, The Last Tiger stars a crew of Nazis, and so on. However, the length of this mode is shorter than ever – even considering the length of individual campaigns in *Battlefield 1*. How did your team approach fitting this complex material into an extremely tight timeframe, and in your opinion, did you succeed?

Eric: It's not really for me to say if we succeeded – that's up to each player of the game. I certainly hope they enjoy each of them. But like *BF1* I suspect everyone will have a favourite that speaks to them the most.

***Battlefield V* brings the series back to World War II, but particularly in its singleplayer portion, is set in areas of the conflict that aren't typically shown in popular media. Was this a calculated risk? What did the team gain (and lose) by not being able to return to old standbys like the Normandy landing?**

Eric: We decided from the outset that to go to WWII we had to bring something new to the mix. I believe that was part of the reason *Battlefield 1* drew players in. But there is an enormous amount of media about WWII, so our challenge was to move beyond what you have already seen and make it fresh again. Hopefully, we have surprised players with our choices.

What criticisms of the singleplayer campaign of *Battlefield V* have your team taken onboard as useful feedback going forward? Will we see more significant additions to the singleplayer portion in the future, like the ultimate release of *The Last Tiger* with the Overture update?

Eric: We absolutely listen to players about what they enjoy most or what they struggle with. From YouTube playthroughs, through Twitter threads to in-depth forum essays.

DICE listens and engages. It's always great that people say they want more. That's better than people saying they've had enough. As for future plans, I can't announce anything here. But I am glad to hear you're interested.

Considering public reactions to the campaign of *Battlefield V*, do you believe that a dedicated singleplayer mode of this scale is still a key portion of a *Battlefield* product?

Lars: It's too early to talk about the future here but the positive reactions we have gotten for our War Stories, and the way they help us frame the historical era at hand, they are certainly a strong part of the full *Battlefield V* offering. We have a diverse audience of different player types and this is where the narrative experiences can shine through and fulfill the needs of all those who want additional dimensions to the world that they experience, be it in singleplayer or modes with more players. ■

“IT'S ALWAYS GREAT THAT PEOPLE SAY THEY WANT MORE”





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REVIEW

HOW WE REVIEW

We review each game on its own merits, and try to match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The main aim of reviews is to help you make buying decisions. To this end, we're selective about what we review, and try to focus on the notable, interesting, exciting or surprising.

DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT

DLC might be new missions for a game, or it might be a single new item. If we think you want to know about it, we'll review it.

EARLY ACCESS

Any released alpha, beta, or otherwise unfinished game that you can currently pay for. For these games, we won't assign a score, but we will tell you whether they're worth your time.

THEY'RE BACK

Whenever there's a bargain or re-release of a significant game, our expert will revisit it and tell you whether it holds up today. With jokes.

OUR SCORING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

00%-09% Broken or offensively bad; absolutely no value.

Example *Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude*

10%-19% We might be able to find one nice thing to say about it, but still not worth anyone's time or money.

Example *Gettysburg: Armored Warfare*

20%-29% Completely falls short of its goals. Very few redeeming qualities.

Examples *Family Guy: Back to the Multiverse*

30%-39% An entirely clumsy or derivative effort. There's little reason to play this game over a similar, better one.

Examples *Trials of the Blood Dragon*

40%-49% Flawed and disappointing.

Examples *Aliens: Colonial Marines*

50%-59% Mediocre. Other games probably do it better, or its unique qualities aren't executed well.

Examples *Primordia, Homefront: The Revolution*

60%-69% There's something to like here, but it can only be recommended with major caveats.

Examples *No Man's Sky, Ghost Recon: Wildlands*

70%-79% A good game that's worth playing. We like it.

Examples *Prey, NieR: Automata*

80%-89% A great game with exceptional moments or features, and touches of brilliance. We love it.

Examples *Overwatch, Night in the Woods*

90%-94% A compelling recommendation for most PC gamers. Important to PC gaming, and likely ahead of its time.

Examples *Bayonetta, Dishonored 2*

95%-96% Far and away one of the best games we've ever played. We recommend it to the entire world.

Examples *Half-Life 2, Kerbal Space Program*

97%-100% Advances the human species. Boosts the immune systems of nearby children and small animals.



The Editor's Choice award is granted in addition to the score, at the discretion of the PC Gamer staff. It represents exceptional quality or innovation.

Find out more
www.bit.ly/pcgreviews



ApeLegs

We've got a whole host of fantastic new releases to tell you about this month – some you may have heard about because of various Early Access schemes (*Slay the Spire* and *Sunless Skies* are the big 'uns), and one which arrived fully-formed and ready to go without so much as a by-your-leave!

The latter is, of course, *Apex Legends*; Respawn's take on the battle royale genre. As well as being a great game, we hope other devs take note of its revolutionary ping system for easy communication with strangers. The one thing James forgot to cover was whether everyone's settled on a nickname for *Apex* yet so allow me to fill in that gap: they have and it's "ApeLegs". You're welcome.

Pipx

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PING PONG

APEX LEGENDS is the best version of battle royale so far, a cooperative shooter that reinvigorates the genre and reinvents how we communicate in games. *By James Davenport*

We press H to pay respects now. My good friend JohnnyBadNews, who I've never met, just let me know they found a level-three scope for my Longbow DMR. The selflessness – they found it in a dead player's inventory, noted that I was using a Longbow, and let me know it was there – all without saying a word. I pick it up and a prompt appears on my screen, "Press H to thank JohnnyBadNews." My index finger hits that H with the firm yet gentle assurance of a hug. I think we all now know what the H stands for.

I shouldn't be feeling this nice. *Apex Legends* is a lot like most battle royale games. You drop from the sky onto an island, sweep the floor for weapons and gear, and scramble to stay inside a series of ever-shrinking circles pressing 60 people towards inevitable conflict. But *Apex Legends* is also the product of the genre's failures so far, a patient and refined response that makes for the most accessible, uncompromising battle royale experience yet.

DRAWING OF THE THREE

Apex Legends is set in the *Titanfall* universe, but plays nothing like it – every gun has ballistics, titans are gone, and so is wall-running. The guns feel responsive and peppy, and taking distance and drop into account in the same split-second formerly used just to take aim makes me feel like a mathematical savant when shots connect.

Almost every gun has a unique personality, but the main thing is there's something for everyone: semi-automatic rifles, automatic rifles, LMGs, and SMGs. Weapon stats are improved by finding and equipping attachments scattered all over the map, which is where I thought *Apex Legends* would lose me. Inventory management is still the worst part of battle royale, but *Apex* auto-equips anything better than what I already have on a compatible weapon. You can dig around and swap some attachments between weapons, or opt for a lesser scope if

you prefer it, but I love that I can let *Apex* run on autopilot and choose what's best.

If everything sounds familiar so far, that's because *Apex* doesn't deviate much from the *PUBG* formula. It's Respawn's particular interpretations of those ideas that make *Apex* feel so special. Communication is probably the best example of this. *Apex* is a shooter that

encourages kinship between squadmates, whether it's concentrating fire on a single target, coordinating abilities, or donating the Devotion LMG you just found to a friend in need.

Enter the 'ping' system, an ingenious tool used to draw attention to locations, items, enemies, and objects that might be of interest to your squadmates. I don't want to go back to *Fortnite* or *PUBG* or any game unless the entire industry

A shooter that encourages kinship between squadmates

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A F2P battle royale FPS set in the *Titanfall* universe

EXPECT TO PAY
Free, with optional cosmetic microtransactions

DEVELOPER
Respawn Entertainment

PUBLISHER
EA

REVIEWED ON
Intel i9-9900k, GeForce 980 Ti, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
Three-player squads, 60 players total

LINK
www.ea.com/en-gb/games/apex-legends



agrees to implement something like it in all multiplayer games forever and ever, amen. It's that simple.

You'll use it most often to mark where you're headed, but if the reticle is over an enemy, the marker will turn into a red crosshair and your character will note they've spotted someone.

Ping an open door and they'll remark someone's probably been there. Your character will spit out a different voice line if you ping an opened loot container or if you ping a closed one, and all eight characters have lines for every item and weapon. You can even ping pings to acknowledge them.

Pinging's darkest magick is its ability to make playing with strangers as worthwhile as playing with friends. My first few wins came from playing with calm, quiet enigmas who coordinated movement, called out enemy locations, and shared loot without speaking or typing anything at all. This itself is a boon to accessibility and a salve to toxicity, but atop it, *Apex* features a text-to-speech comms option for players with difficulty speaking or worried about harassment, which feels like a revolutionary act when multiplayer games like *Anthem* and *Fallout 76* release without text chat at all.

To go from being routinely debased by legions of preteen racists in *Fortnite* to notching wins with strangers in utter silence in *Apex Legends* is a videogame miracle.

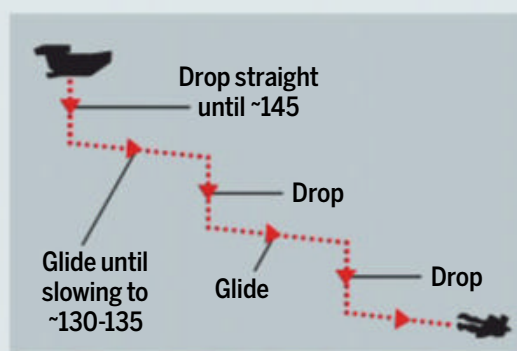
ANOTHER ROUND OF FUN

Typically the most anxiety-inducing part of learning a new battle royale game, the drop gives one squadmate control while the other two hang on until they're ready to let go, which might be never. And that's OK, because every squad leaves behind a coloured contrail, making it simple to see which way the competitive wind is blowing. Calling out where other teams are landing is more important to surviving the ensuing gauntlet than where you land.

GET THE DROP

How to land faster than your opponents

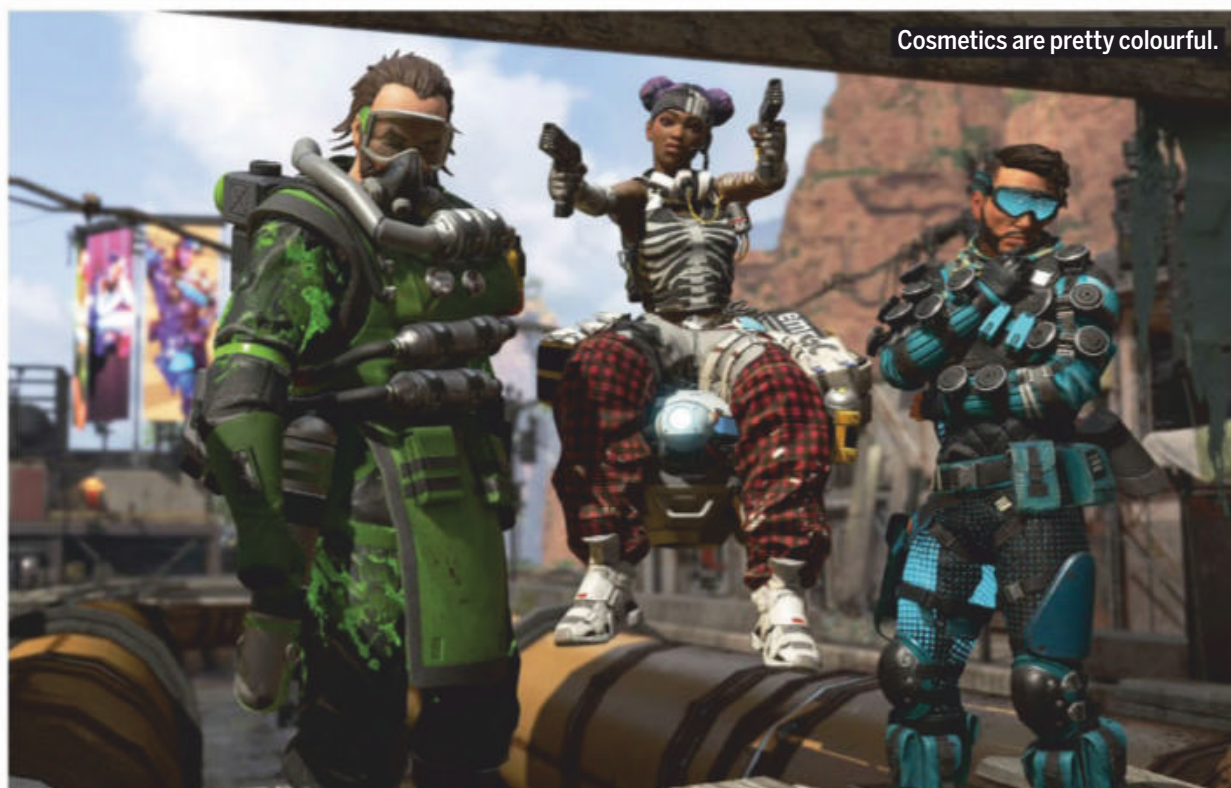
If you want to drop further and faster, note the advice of Reddit's u/TheBigSmoke. Fly straight down to build speed, level out, and repeat.



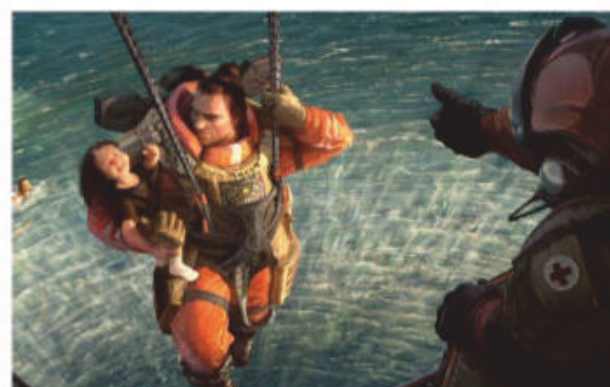
42, the meaning of death.



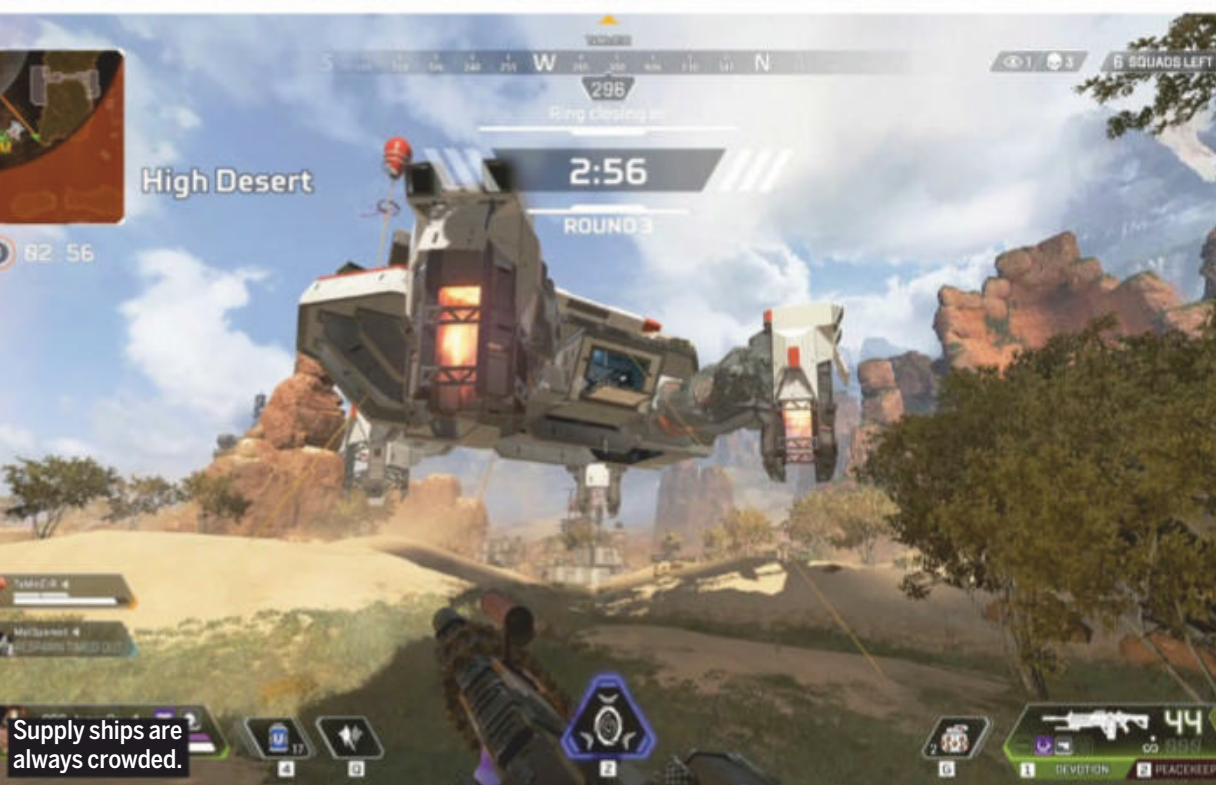
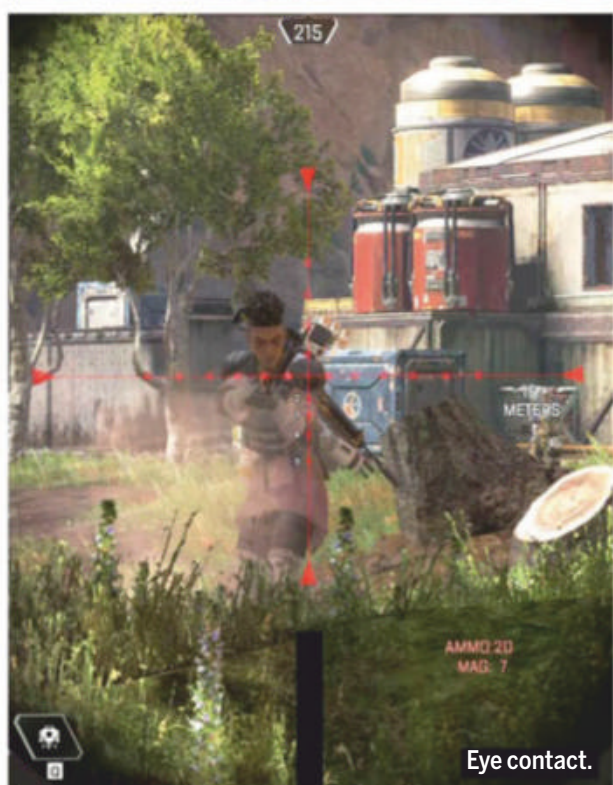
Cosmetics are pretty colourful.



Pathfinder contemplates life.



Eye contact.

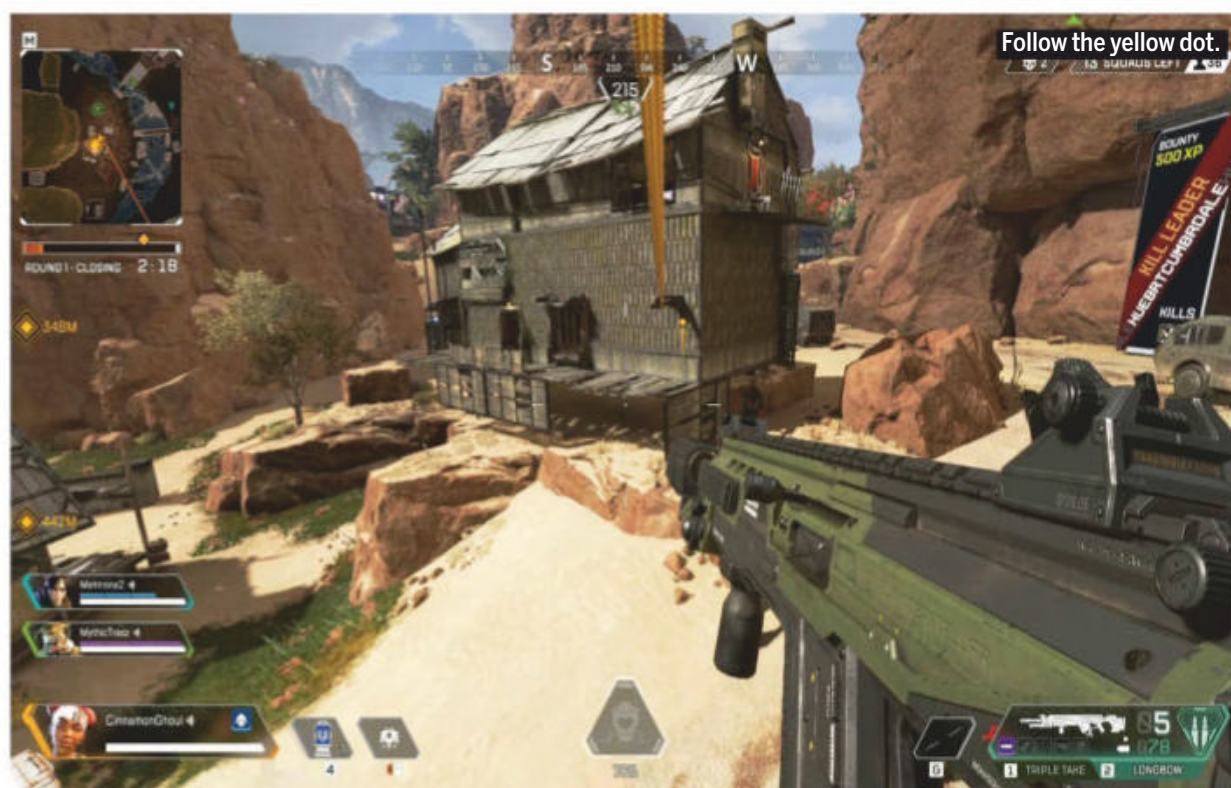


Supply ships are always crowded.

Bangalore dropping smoke.



Bloodhound is ready for their closeup.



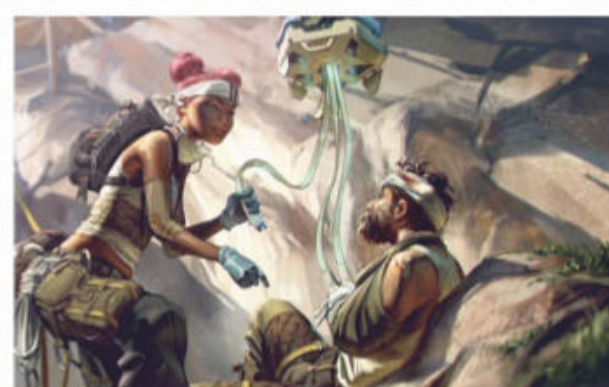
Follow the yellow dot.



Nice.



Gibraltar saving lives, lookin' handsome.



Once you land, moving through Apex's island is a constant joy, a playground of jutting cliffs and gigantic skeletons and clusters of buildings. It recalls the smaller, crowded arenas of the original *Modern Warfare* and the once incalculable expanse of *Halo's* Blood Gulch in the same minute.

Sliding is the most reliable way to get around. Hit C on a downward slope and you'll glide like a toboggan. Apex shows its skill ceiling and playfulness with this mechanic – every short staircase provides a hit of free speed, but sliding is also equally important as a defensive posture, a way to change your body profile and evade while under fire.

And I'm always sliding somewhere. Apex avoids *Fortnite's* Tilted Tower crowding problem by marking a random hot loot spot each match, and sending a supply ship with even more goodies floating across the map. As a result, everyone tends to disperse in unpredictable directions, and the meta for Apex's map feels pleasantly uncertain.

Fights aren't always fast and aggressive – there are abilities that slow them down and allow for retreats and regroupings that allow for a bit of breathing room before the next showdown. If things get too hot, Wraith can go invisible for a few seconds and retreat. Pathfinder can create a zipline that spans whole arenas. Gibraltar can pop a dome shield to protect a chokepoint or give the team a second to react when caught in the open.

But most characters have blindspots that feed back into team communication. When Wraith pops into the void, enemies disappear completely from her field of vision. A few pings from a friend can help. Caustic gains 'threat vision' on enemies moving through his gas clouds, a good cue to ping away. Not all abilities are as immediately effective though. Gibraltar can force an entire squad from cover with a mortar strike, while Mirage's ultimate just turns you invisible and spawns a bunch of decoys that stand around doing a very good decoy impression. It's easy to see through.

This isn't *Overwatch* – the abilities add flavour and characterisation, but are almost never game-winners on their own. Every character has the same health and movement speed. The emphasis is still on precision aiming and smart manoeuvring, with



MEET THE LEGENDS *Characters' primary abilities*



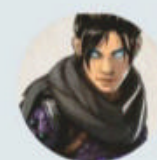
MIRAGE
Deploys decoys



CAUSTIC
Leaves gas traps



BANGALORE
Drops smoke



WRAITH
Creates portals



PATHFINDER
Deploys ziplines



LIFELINE
Deploys healing drone



GIBRALTAR
Drops bubble shield



BLOODHOUND
Tracks enemies

a little help from abilities that relieve or induce pressure.

For those raised on the time-to-kill of *Call of Duty* and the *Titanfall* games, Apex's health pools might feel a little big. If someone is wearing level-three armour, they'll absorb multiple shotgun blasts, or an entire SMG magazine. This is intentional.

The most satisfying kills act against classic FPS instincts. Slowly chipping away at an enemy squad's health from afar so they use up their healing items is a valid strategy.

Using your downed teammate as an actual shield – Apex makes this 'knockdown shield' an actual item you can activate when you're down but not out, giving you a more active role in this near-death phase.

I've seen clips of players filling a small room with loot only to trap a squad inside by blocking the doorways with Caustic's gas traps. Weapons are only as effective as wits in Apex, and deeper health pools ask the player to think of what else they can do to gain an advantage besides shooting.

The elasticity stretches to death, too, a novelty for battle royale. Pick up any eliminated teammate's banner and you can revive them at any respawn station. These stations are rarely located anywhere safe or convenient, but the lengths to which I've had total strangers go to revive me never fail to inspire. I've been carried by a demigod, respawned three times in a single match for a second-place spot I didn't deserve.

Struggling to keep your team in the game can be as satisfying as confidently gunning for first place.

COMMUNICATION

Apex Legends feels like a trick. It's a free-to-play battle royale game announced and released on the same day with no early access phase, very little downtime, and cosmetic microtransactions that don't feel predatory. Queue times are the fastest in the genre, the guns are the result of over a decade of refinement across

multiple studios, and every character has a role to play in a close knit team.

Apex is stable, spilling over with smart design touches, and it's set a new industry standard with an impressive breadth of

accessibility options and communication tools.

After a couple years of seeing battle royale games release in unfinished states, Respawn's confident spin on gaming's most popular trend has completely reinvigorated my enthusiasm for the genre. It'll need consistent support and long term updates to stay exciting, but Apex Legends is one hell of an opening salvo. Free, friendly, and consistently fun, it's the best battle royale game available today. ■

The elasticity stretches to death, too, a novelty for battle royale

PC GAMER VERDICT

Apex Legends is a quiet revolution in how we communicate in games, and an great team-based battle royale experience.

93

ACE

SLAY THE SPIRE is one of the most elegantly designed games in recent memory. *By Evan Lahti*

The joy of a singleplayer card game like *Slay the Spire* is that it puts absolutely and utterly brilliant broken combos within your grasp. It feels good to deal 50 poison damage to something. But it feels even better when you drop a series of cards that sextuples that amount of poison, kills an enemy, and triggers a corpse explosion that cascades splash damage to all of the other things that are trying to kill you.

Slay the Spire has zeroed-in on this feeling of linking cards together to produce avalanches of damage, defence, or utility. Plenty of games put this domino-effect sensation at the centre of their gameplay loop, like when you collect enough *Diablo* gear to unlock some obscene damage multiplier, or when you *Call* enough *Duty* to temporarily become a helicopter.

Slay the Spire's achievement is the way it makes this feeling of power simultaneously so potent and elusive. This is an intricately designed deck-building game grounded in deliberate balance, populated by confounding enemies, steady rewards, and tactile decks of cards that play like efficient, beautiful machines of your own creation.

Slay the Spire splits its 283 cards across three characters – The Ironclad, The Silent, and The Defect. The fantasy monsters that stand between the character you pick and the top of the spire don't play cards of their own. Instead they fight sort of like a pokémon, inflicting damage, pesky status effects, or buffing themselves each turn. These actions are telegraphed in advance through the UI. The outcome of this design is that I never feel cheated when I die; rare for a roguelike or card game, let alone one that intersects the two.

Simply knowing *Slay the Spire's* combos or best cards isn't enough to earn a win. Your willingness to abandon your sweet deck idea when the RNG isn't serving up, say, loads of lightning orb cards for the Defect character is itself a skill. You're building an aeroplane as you fly it,

from partially randomised parts, through an *FTL*-style web of varied encounters and events.

CARD FU

There are moments when *Slay the Spire* feels like a turn-based fighting game. The audio does most of this work, serving up expressive sounds that convey motion and impact in addition to training your brain on fine details like status effect

triggers. The glacial crunch when my Defect drops multiple frost orbs is ear candy. Ditto the quintuple-tap thud of the Silent's Flechettes against a lifebar, or the toxic clink of the Bouncing Flask as it spills poison over random enemies. One deck type for The Silent became one of my

This is an intricately designed deck-building game

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A roguelike, singleplayer deckbuilder

EXPECT TO PAY
£20

DEVELOPER
Mega Crit

PUBLISHER
Mega Crit

REVIEWED ON
Windows 10, Core i7-4770K, 16GB RAM, GeForce GTX 980 Ti

MULTIPLAYER
None

LINK
www.megacrit.com



favourites because of the sound it made. This 'death by a thousand cuts' build is all about playing as many zero-cost attack cards as possible in order to accumulate absurd strength and defence bonuses through relics. Over four or five combat rounds, your pinpricks transform into gouging, 40-damage swings. When this deck is in full motion, it's a chorus of stacking steel as a dozen shivs leave your hand as quickly as they enter.

ATTACK THE BLOCK

Slay the Spire's playful fantasy art, on the other hand, contributes less to the joy of its combat. Enemies don't animate a whole lot, and as I battled these monsters again and again I found myself exclusively looking at the cards in my hand rather than taking in the fight. *Darkest Dungeon* remains the pinnacle of this style of art for its skull-rattling 2D combat camerawork, and *Slay the Spire* might have benefited from this kind of cinematic flare.

One other poke I'd make – I don't love that blocking damage feels so central to victory. Tracking down the relics and cards to create ample defence is by no means automatic, but across all three characters, loading up on block was the common thread in my wins. Still, this seems trivial compared to the genre-bending achievement that *Slay the Spire* represents.

The essence of what makes a great card game is readily available here – the joy of building a machine and optimising it as much as you can. As is the bottomless surprise, the highs and lows of roguelikes.

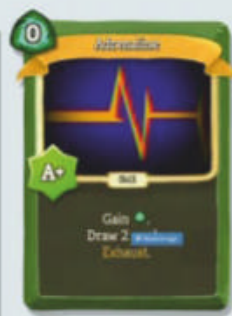
If that isn't enough, recently added moddability is already bringing new decks, enemies, and cards to tinker with. ■

BOMB CARDS

Keep an eye out for these great cards



**ECHO FORM
THE DEFECT**
Your first card of every turn is automatically double-played. See what happens when you play two of them.



**ADRENALINE
THE SILENT**
Free energy, free cards. It's all about momentum, and this is a shot in the arm to any anaemic turn.



**FEED
THE IRONCLAD**
Who needs defence when you have 200 HP? Pairs with self-damaging cards like Offering to great effect.

PC GAMER VERDICT

A strategically deep deckbuilder that, with any luck, has spawned a brilliant, new subgenre.

92

Every enemy has its own trick.



Upgrading cards at rest sites gives more powerful green-titled '+' abilities.



A 'Pen Nib' relic deals double damage every tenth attack.



One of the bosses limits the number of cards you can play.



Challenge elite enemies to acquire rare relics.



CHUFFING GREAT

Enjoy a train ride into madness in the disturbing, unforgettable **SUNLESS SKIES**. *By Chris Schilling*

We have a Marvel Cinematic Universe, so why not a Failbetter Interactive Universe? The third game in the world of *Fallen London* also has its share of daring heroics in the face of impending doom, but instead of saving the world you're usually trying to save yourself. In a place where time comes in barrels and souls in jars, where the horrors of the skies can cause you to lose your marbles, it's probably easier to lapse into villainy. Not least when food supplies run out, and your crewmates begin to look awfully tasty.

The follow-up to *Sunless Sea* is in keeping with Failbetter Games' fondness for putting players into crisis management mode from minute one. As second in command to a dying captain, you've got to guide your knackered locomotive into port and then take over. You're free to choose your own path from there, but without a map it's not going to be easy. Fame, fortune and a long-standing mystery are among the goals, but your initial job is just to stay alive.

In many respects, it's similar to its predecessor. At once a piece of interactive fiction, an RPG, a survival game and a top-down adventure. You explore the world at a slow, methodical pace in a rickety craft that can't take much punishment, picking up cargo and the odd passenger and ferrying them between ports. On land or in the air you'll face choices (usually between bad and worse)

which can be influenced by the character you rolled at the start and the dice that subsequently determine success or failure.

Break it down to its fundamentals and *Sunless Skies* can sound unremarkable. It works because of how brilliantly those disparate

elements combine to produce exciting stories, from scrapes you survive by the skin of your teeth, to moments your own hubris gets you killed. Where *Sunless Sea* fell down slightly was the way the natural

repetition of its roguelike structure gradually sucked the life out of those stories. You'll soon discover Failbetter hasn't exactly gone soft, but it has found ways to cushion the blow.

DEAD AGAIN

Start again, and you'll gain much of the previous captain's experience to spend how you like, while keeping

Every episode is informed by the type of captain you were

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

An adventure on the high skies, with roguelike elements and lots of lovely words

EXPECT TO PAY
£19

DEVELOPER
Failbetter Games

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i5-8350K
CPU, 8GB RAM, GeForce GTX 1060

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
failbettergames.com/sunless-skies



your ship minus one installed add-on. Depending on what's removed, this can feel like a real kick in the teeth, especially if it's something you recently spent money on. In other words, death is a punishment but it's not too severe – and it can even be a blessing in disguise. Every episode is informed by the type of captain you were at the start and the decisions you've made ever since; some even by your predecessor. And so while some things will be familiar on a replay, plenty won't. On a new run, you can pursue a new ambition, or go for the same goal with a head start – perhaps with a different backstory that means you can use guile to get through tricky situations instead of muscle.

Beyond the changes you make, the sheer range of scenarios and potential outcomes means you'll discover something new on every run. This time you might risk pressing on through a storm for the chance to encounter a three-headed fox, rather than turning back because you've already lost half your crew and bad things tend to happen more often when you're short-handed. If it's all getting a bit much dying needn't mean starting again – when it's game over you can choose to carry on from the last port you visited instead.

All of which makes it easier to get to what really makes *Sunless Skies* great – the writing. Evocative, witty and razor sharp, it turns text into a reward – you'll find yourself seeking the right combination of items just to open up new lines of conversation. They're the most important currency in a game that gives you a clutch of weird and wonderful tales to tell, even when you fail miserably. In these moments you'll realise that while you may not have achieved your goal, Failbetter certainly has. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

The sharpest writing around wrapped inside an adventure that's tough but rarely unfair. Failbetter's finest hour.

90

FOUR OFF THE FLOOR *A quartet of faces in the cloud...*



INDURATE VETERAN
Scowling, scarred and smoking, she'll pay a pretty penny for your port reports.



PARSIMONIOUS CHAIRMAN
A bad egg who wants you to take out the Tacketies – for a fee, of course.

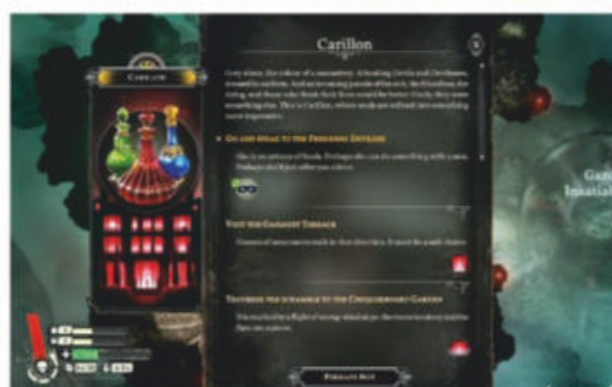
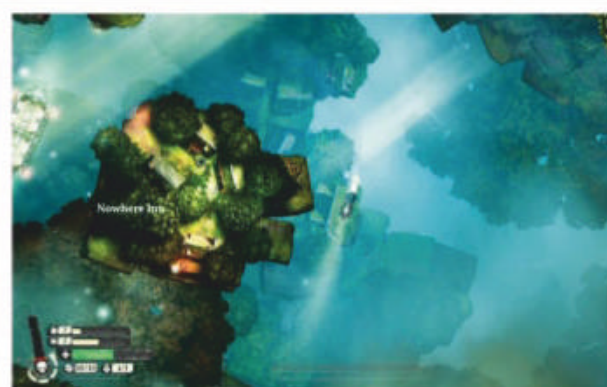


AMENABLE HOST
Help him investigate his mysterious past and he'll cure what ails you.



REPENTANT DEVIL
On the straight and narrow? Maybe. Who knows? But now there's a corpse on board...

Marauders are bad, but
monsters are worse.



JUMP FARCE

In **JUMP FORCE**, the characters of Shonen Jump magazine have dull fights. *By Andi Hamilton*

Jump Force lifts from Shonen Jump magazine's 50-year history, a publication that has been the home of some genuinely legendary manga series, including *Fist of the North Star* and *Dragon Ball*. These are all stories that revolve around their protagonists getting in fights, so you'd think *Jump Force* would be an easy win. A *Smash Bros*-esque big brawl featuring them all should be easy to recommend, but this won't leave devotees of any series jumping for joy.

Jump Force is sort of a fighting game. It's a 3v3 arena brawler based around a simplistic, button mashing combat system. You repeatedly hit the light attack or heavy attack buttons to string together some impressive looking strikes, which you can guard against or dodge. Special moves are tied to a meter you fill through combat or by charging it yourself, which leaves you vulnerable.

There's no execution barrier – special moves are all performed by button presses. *Dragon Ball FighterZ* proves that a great fighting game doesn't need complex combos, but *Jump Force*'s approach has an unintended side effect. Every character feels identical to play.

They each have their own unique animations and special moves, but you're triggering them in exactly the same way no matter which character you've picked. The basic attacks and special moves feel disconnected from one another, too.

Traditional fighting game techniques like ending a combo of hits with a special move rarely works, and there's no reason to not just see a chain of strikes through to the end once you've landed that initial one.

Although these flashing lights and sounds are authentic enough to entertain fans of the source material for a while, the canned animations eventually outstay their welcome. The story also turns out to be a bit of a means to an end too. A typical world-ending crisis has come about as a hackneyed reason to put all of these characters together in one place. You create a silent avatar who

is killed during an attack on New York City by an enemy force called 'Venoms' and is brought back as a *Shonen Jump* hero, all super strength, energy blasts and air dashes.

You join one of three teams, headed up by Goku, Luffy or Naruto and take on missions that either progress their storyline or generic ones that net you experience points

and unlockables like costumes. Experience points increase health and damage output, and you can buy new special abilities, one use items to help you in battle and skills that give

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
An anime brawler with a cast of famous characters

EXPECT TO PAY
£50

DEVELOPER
Spike Chunsoft

PUBLISHER
Bandai Namco Entertainment

REVIEWED ON
i5-7300 2.5ghz, 8gb RAM, GTX 1050

MULTIPLAYER
1v1

LINK
www.bandainamcoent.com/games/jump-force

you perks like attack buffs or elemental resistance.

LOOSE CONTROLS

The characters themselves, as iconic as their source material may be, are a mixed bag. Goku, for instance, looks like a bad action figure – a far cry from his appearance in the gorgeous *Dragon Ball FighterZ*. In cutscenes movement is stilted and awkward with some unintentionally hilarious moments like characters sliding all the way across the screen.

The way fighters move during combat lacks the tightness of control you'd want in a fighting game. This is such a missed opportunity – many of these characters have made the jump from the printed page, but here they're strange, soulless avatars. It's not all bad, as the various worlds these characters hail from are represented by some excellent arenas, as well as a handful of 'real world' ones thrown in for good measure.

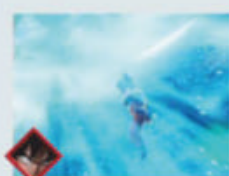
The camera gets lost in amongst the action from time to time, making for some confusing situations.

Online, *Jump Force* is functional, allowing for ranked and casual battles against others, unlocking titles and currency for you to spend on items in the singleplayer game. Unfortunately, battling another human being doesn't make the combat any more interesting, instead highlighting how limited and simple it is. It's like a match against an AI opponent who might actually block and try to use some semblance of strategic play against you, but that's about it.

Jump Force finds itself in a weird place. Cult characters in a genre known for attracting a hardcore following and yet, doesn't deliver on the promise of the concept to either party in a satisfying manner. ■

SIX OF THE BEST

Ripped from the pages of Shonen Jump



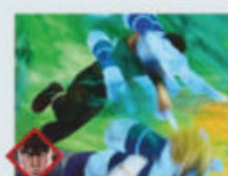
SUPER SPIRIT BOMB

Goku creates a massive orb of death to throw at his enemy.



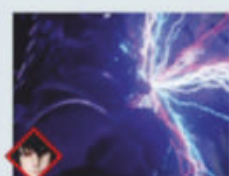
DIABLE JAMBE! CONCASSE SPIN

Shinji leaps into the air dropping his heel onto his opponent's head.



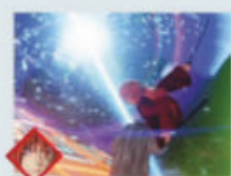
BATTLE GRIEF

Kenshiro draws upon his internalised rage and mastery of Hokotu Shinken.



TAKEMIKAZUCHI - NO-KAMI

Takemikazuchi is a god of thunder AND swords in Japanese mythology.



GODSPEED FLASH OF THE HEAVENLY FLYING DRAGON

Creates a sword from pure energy.



X.Y.Z.

Ryo hits his enemy with a rocket launcher then drives into them in a classic Mini Cooper.

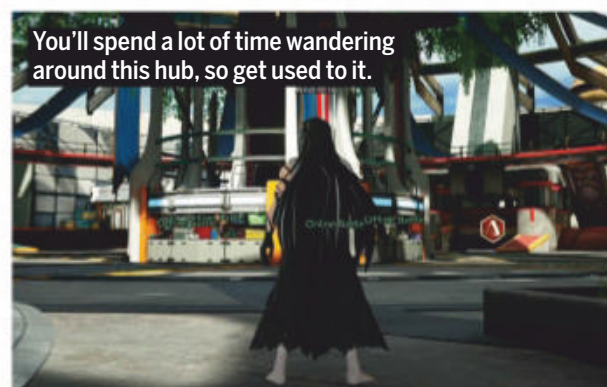
PC GAMER VERDICT

An epic clash between the some of manga's most legendary characters shouldn't be this dull, frankly.

55



Jump Force's roster is a real who's who of classic characters.



Some of the character models are better than the others, like Jotaro here.



The costumes are pretty varied, some sillier than others.



GROOVY, BABY

WARGROOVE sends dogs to war in their best amour. *By Malindy Hetfeld*

It's very hard not to focus entirely on Caesar, *Wargroove's* best boy and commander of his own army of warpups. Yes, dogs in shiny armour are a playable unit in this game. There is no violence against the four-legged soldiers, either – instead of dying, they just run away. If you're not sold already, one of the other 12 commanders might do the trick. Don't be fooled by the light-hearted tone, however – *Wargroove* is filled with creative, demanding challenges.

An easy comparison to reach for is *Into The Breach*. Both feature direct, turn-based confrontation between two factions who often use the landscape to their advantage. But *Wargroove* is more in every way – more factions, more units, more maps, more more. This could sound overwhelming but getting started is actually really easy.

In the first few missions, as well as the arcade mode, your goal is generally to either defeat the opposing army's commander or take their fortress.

Capturing unallied buildings on the map or taking them from your opponent earns you money, which you can spend on new units or health. The campaign introduces the units one after another and gives you hints as to their use.

The first time you're up against airborne fiends, for example, you also gain ballistas and mages, both excellent against that particular type of enemy. These missions give you time to get to know units and their strengths and weaknesses without being overbearing.

While all armies share the same standard units they all have distinctly different looks that fit each commander and their lands beautifully. Commanders are the most important characters, not only because they're the strongest, but because each of them has a unique special ability, the so-called groove, which is charged by defeating enemies. Some grooves have defensive capabilities and some are good, old-fashioned special attacks.

The 30-plus missions of the single-player campaign follow a cute fantasy story. As well as standard conquering and destruction tasks, you'll be rescuing prisoners from a fortress or helping refugees flee the site of a battle. If you prefer a quick challenge, there's an arcade mode for each commander, and a puzzle mode.

COMMAND & CONQUER

Wargroove's weaknesses are at times crushing difficulty and tendency to drag on. Positioning characters in the right spots for attacks and critical hits is already

difficult enough. But *Wargroove's* maps are huge, meaning you can spend round after round simply travelling to meet the enemy. It's not always clear how damage is calculated, and I had to adjust the difficulty options to have a chance at more than one mission. Maps often have chokepoints such as bridges that can be difficult to circumvent, quickly leading to your soldiers literally queuing to get slaughtered.

The multiplayer for up to four people comes with its own maps and is organised by passing in-game match codes around. In two-player mode, I found small maps, evenly split in the middle by bridges. Both players pick a commander and start out on equal footing, with the same amount of buildings to conquer on each side, including multiple barracks. In this mode it's vital to take buildings and retain them, as you're going for direct confrontation with no way to skirt each other.

Once you hold enough buildings, meaning money, and hold even just one barracks more than the other player, the game is all but decided. Victory is again achieved by killing the commander or taking the fort, so real players are more likely than the CPU to aggressively bolster their forces to keep buildings surrounded. Whereas the campaign manages to switch things up, here the simple gameplay works to *Wargroove's* detriment – I could have done with more variety to elevate this mode above its arcade counterpart.

Wargroove comes with a brilliant set of highly intuitive tools you can use to create your own maps and even cutscenes. Chucklefish certainly wants you in for the long haul, but as I started skipping lengthy battle animations and came to dread any standard battle, I wondered whether less isn't sometimes more. ■

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

Turn-based tactical strategy in which you play 12 adorable fantasy factions including an armoured golden retriever

EXPECT TO PAY

£16

DEVELOPER

Chucklefish

PUBLISHER

In-house

REVIEWED ON

Core i5-8400, GTX 1060, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER

2 to 4 players local and online

LINK

wargroove.com

Wargroove is filled with creative, demanding challenges

COMMAND ME *The hottest leaders on the battlefield*



MERCIA

Always smiling and looks like she could bench press me.



VALDER

A deep voice and blue, blue eyes create mystique.



RYOTA

Needs the right person to coax a smile out of him.

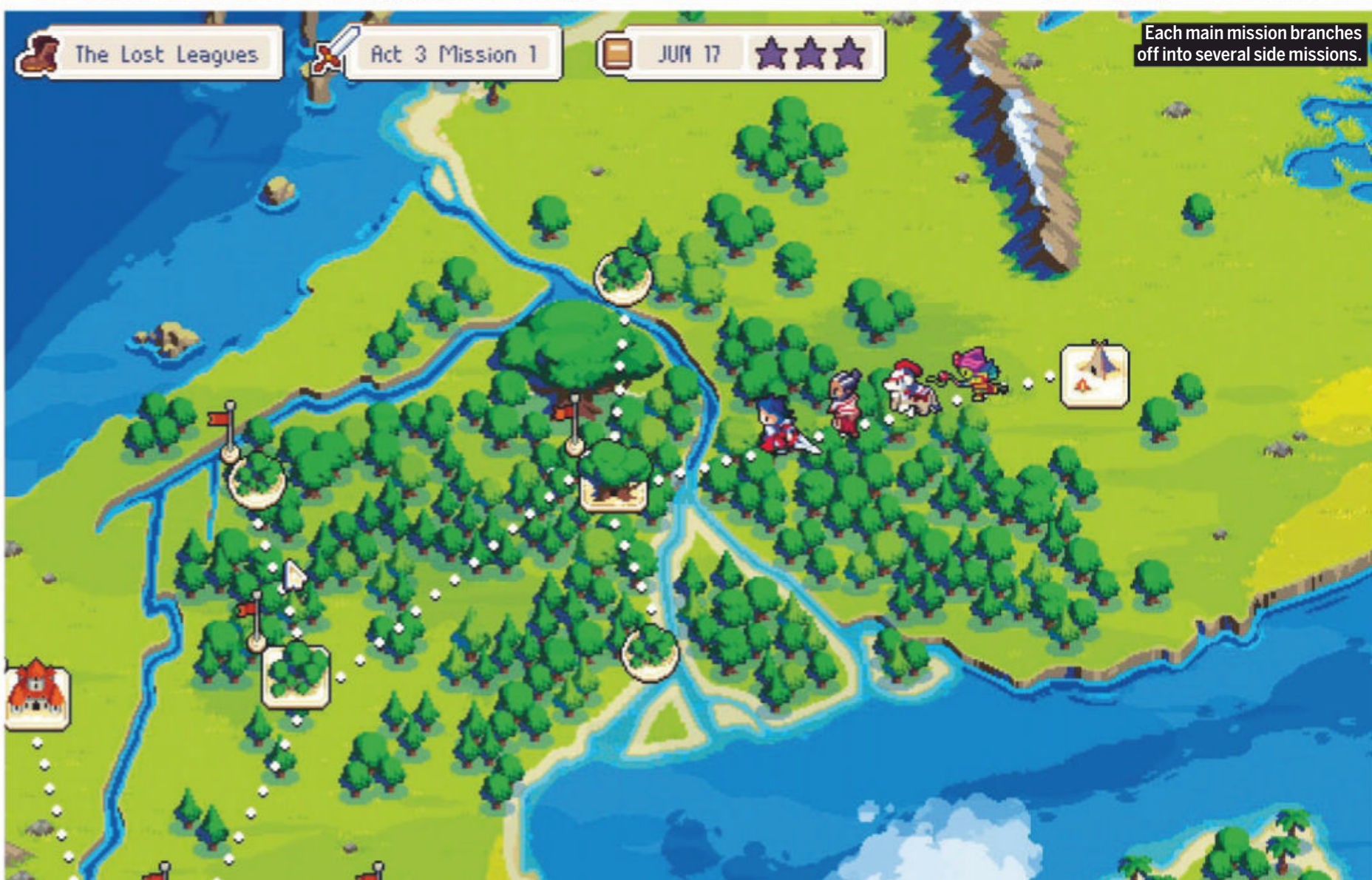
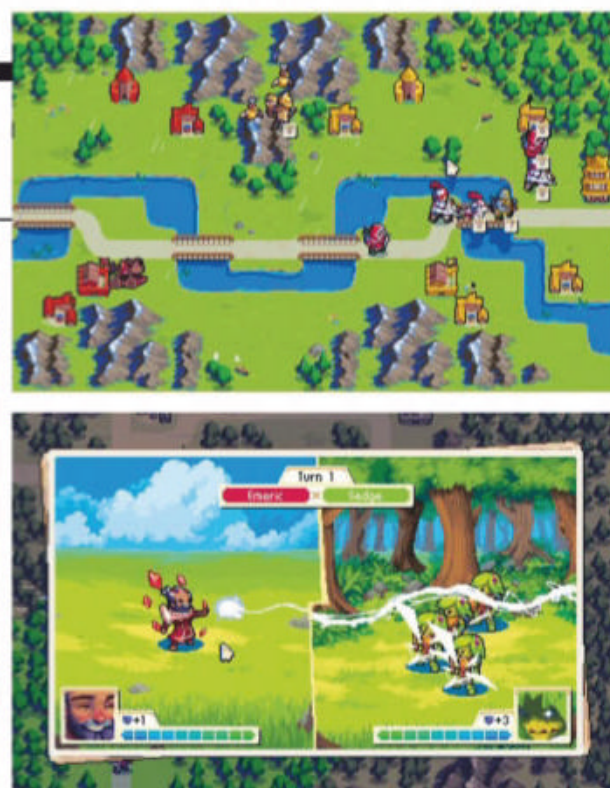
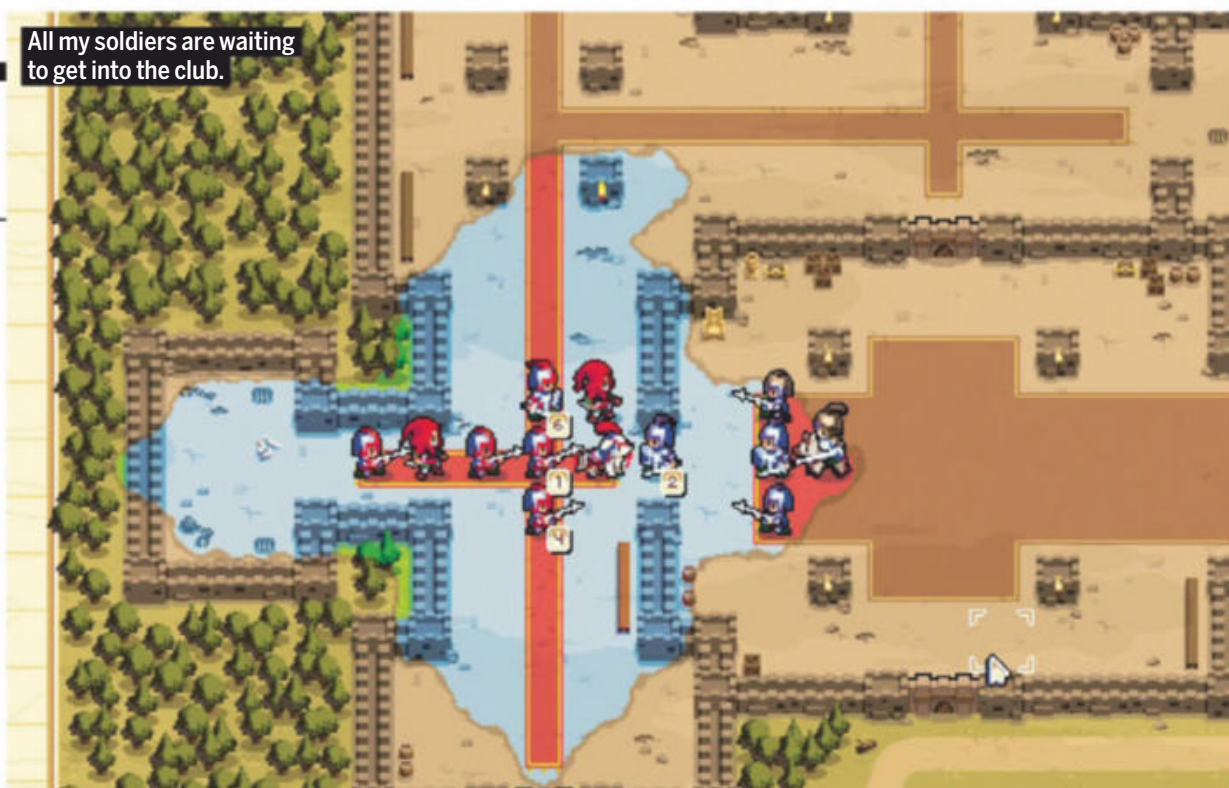
PC GAMER

VERDICT

Brimming character and imagination, *Wargroove* occasionally loses its groove over long-winded core gameplay.

78

All my soldiers are waiting to get into the club.



Girl, same.



...I can only afford a Swordsman right now.

OFF THE RAILS

METRO EXODUS leaves the grimy tunnels of Moscow behind and takes you on a whirlwind tour of post-apocalyptic Russia. *By Andy Kelly*

After two games spent in the claustrophobic gloom of the Moscow Metro, it's a strange sensation, at least for a *Metro* game, to be suddenly staring across a vast, sun-bleached desert. *Exodus* is a post-apocalyptic road trip through a nuke-blasted Russia, and an arid expanse of what was once the Caspian Sea is one of a number of locations visited by Artyom and his band of survivors. But even with blue skies and the closest thing you can get to clean air in this grim, dead world, survival is still an everyday struggle.

I say road trip, but your primary mode of transport in *Metro Exodus* is an old Soviet era steam train called the Aurora. The game begins in familiar surroundings – the shattered, radioactive ruins of Moscow and the labyrinth of tunnels beneath it. But it's not long before the Aurora is speeding out of the fallen capital, along the Volga River, and into the countryside.

This is your first taste of the open world in *Exodus*, which is made up of several large, self-contained areas, rather than one continuous sprawl.

Metro has always been a rigidly, sometimes suffocatingly linear shooter, but now you have the opportunity to venture off the beaten path, scavenge, and explore. It's a restrained freedom, limited by the size of the maps, but there's something refreshing about an open world that focuses more on detail

than size. Every location the Aurora stops at feels hand-crafted and the weather, atmosphere, and lighting regularly change as the story spans the seasons, making for an excitingly varied game.

Now you have the opportunity to venture off the beaten path

But this variety extends only to the setting and structure. The brutal, kinetic first-person combat and lightweight survival elements that define the *Metro* games haven't changed in any significant way. Ammo and gas mask filters are still precious commodities, and Artyom still spends the majority of the game in scrappy, tense firefights. This means, despite the spectacular change of scenery, it still feels like part of the series. But it also makes *Exodus*, in some ways, rather disappointing in its lack of ambition.

OUT AND ABOUT

The context, stakes, and location will change, and there are some

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A post-apocalyptic first-person shooter

EXPECT TO PAY
£50

DEVELOPER
4A Games

PUBLISHER
Deep Silver

REVIEWED ON
GTX 1080, Intel i5-6600K, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
None

LINK
www.metrothegame.com

fantastically dramatic set-pieces here, but it's a shame how, fundamentally, every encounter in *Metro* boils down to shooting people. I know it sounds like I'm criticising an FPS for having too much S, but if you're going to give me this big, fascinating, beautiful world to explore, I feel like there should be more interesting ways to interact with it. Sometimes you can approach a situation stealthily, tossing tin cans to distract guards and quietly killing or incapacitating them, but that's about as exotic as it gets.

The furiously paced combat can be thrilling, especially when you start modding your guns, transforming puny revolvers into freakish weapons of mass destruction. But whether you're fighting mutants or humans, the AI is never particularly sharp or reactive, and constantly scrabbling for ammo can be a chore. The guns feel great, and I love how you can strip enemy weapons and attach the scavenged parts to your own at a workbench. But the novelty of shooting hordes of crustaceans, bandits, and zombies soon wears off, and after a while I found myself yearning for more depth.

As for the survival elements, they do add some welcome texture to the game. Even though you've left the Metro, there are still moments where you have to equip your gas mask: radiation leaks, sandstorms, poison gas, and other nasty stuff. And every

KITTED OUT *Essential wasteland survival gear*



GAS MASK

If you encounter radiation, toxic fungus or other poison gas, equip your gas mask. But the filter won't last forever. You'll need to change it regularly, and if you run out... hold your breath.



CHARGER

Batteries are hard to come by, but this hand-pumped charger is the next best thing. If your flashlight flickers it's probably low on juice, and a few pumps of this will sort it out.



NOTEPAD

Calling this a notepad undersells it because this tool incorporates a radio, compass, and map. There are no objective markers on the HUD so you'll have to refer to it often.



BINOCULARS

If you find yourself somewhere high up, take out your binoculars. Anything interesting you spot, and zoom in on, will be marked as an X on your map, reminding you to explore it.



BRACER

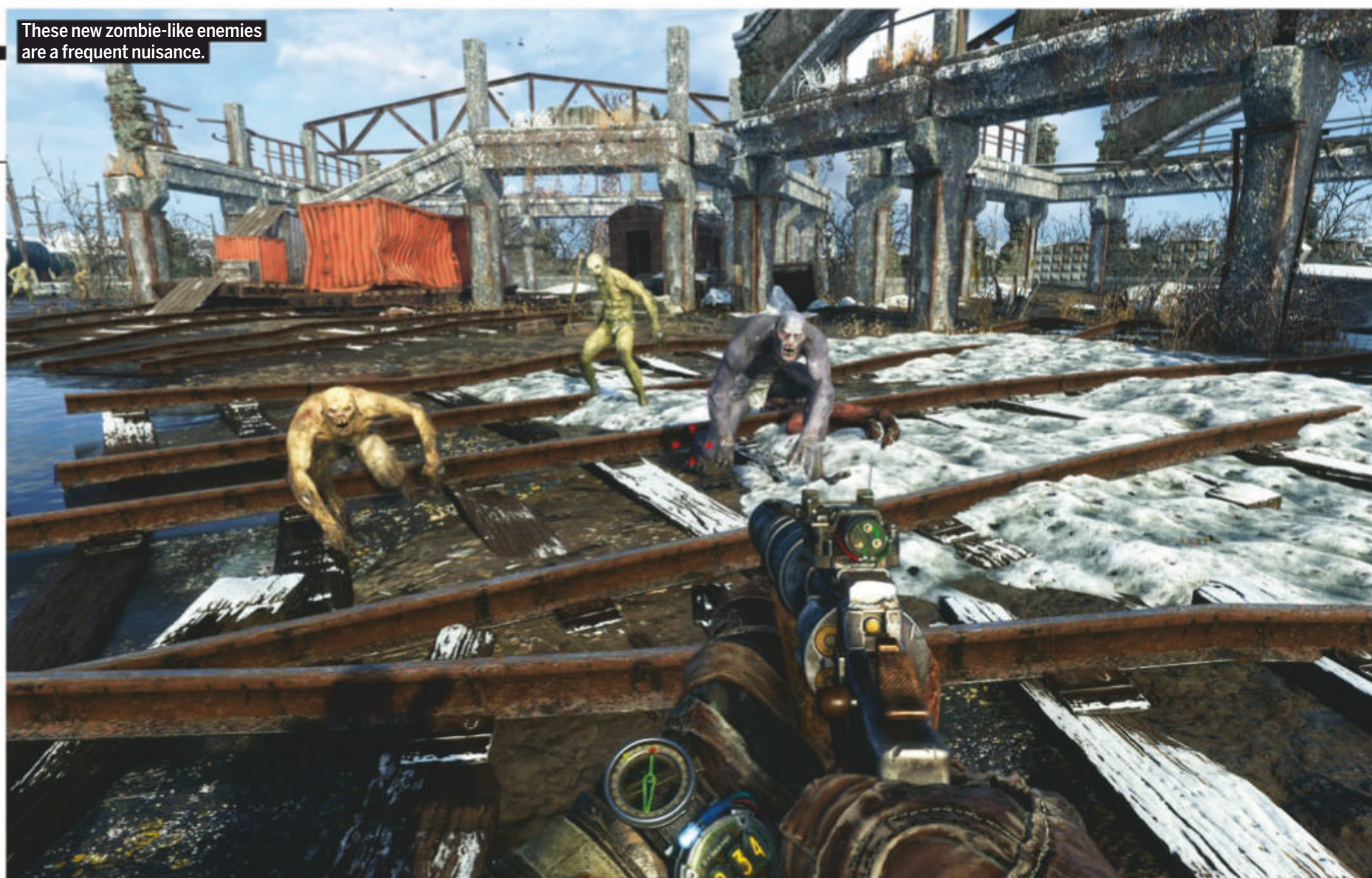
Another versatile tool, letting Artyom monitor his radiation levels, see the time, and orient himself with an objective at a glance. The compass isn't installed by default – you'll have to find one.



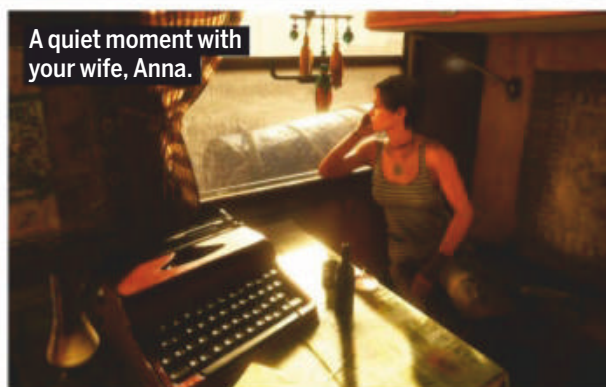
NIGHT VISION GOGGLES

Locate this handy piece of old world technology and you'll be able to see clearly in the darkest areas. Just remember to keep the battery juiced up with the charger.

These new zombie-like enemies are a frequent nuisance.



A quiet moment with your wife, Anna.



One of Artyom's fellow survivors.



Spider mutants don't like fire.



One of the vehicles you drive in the game.





The characters of the Aurora feel like family.



Mutated prawns.
I hate them.



Equip your gas mask
if a sandstorm kicks up.



Not everyone in the wasteland
wants to kill you...



...This guy
does, though.

moment you spend in this toxic air, a timer ticks down, meaning you have to find a steady supply of replacement filters. There's crafting too, which makes scouring the world for materials to build ammo and repair your mask and guns an important part of your routine. None of these systems are invasive, however, and the light-touch survival management reinforces the fiction without being overbearing.

LOOK AND SEE

Outside of combat there are some other new features, including the ability to use binoculars. If you climb somewhere high, such as a rusty old crane near the Volga that rattles violently in the wind, you can scan the horizon and zoom in on points of interest, marking them on your map. You won't know what it is until you travel there, which makes for some fun exploration, even if it's usually just more things to shoot at. I do like how each map is littered with stories. Some are relayed through diary entries and tape recordings, but it's the ones told by the environment that are the most vivid: a crashed plane with its skeletal pilot still at the controls, or an abandoned school littered with mouldy textbooks and colourful kids' drawings.

There are a few vehicles too, usually reserved for the larger maps, and slightly silly ziplines straight out of a *Far Cry* game. The weather can change suddenly and there's an ever-shifting day/night cycle, which you can speed up by sleeping at campsites. If you go somewhere at night there may be fewer enemies to deal with, but you could also be harassed by deadly ball lightning, which seems to be the *Metro* equivalent of the anomalies in *Stalker*. But this idea is underdeveloped, and I would have liked more weirdness in the wasteland, to make leaving the relative comfort of the Metro feel more alien and frightening.

What makes *Exodus* special, and the reason it held my interest all the way to the end despite the weak combat, is the journey. Freed from the dark maze of the Moscow Metro, the environment artists at 4A Games have achieved something remarkable here. From the frozen banks of the Volga to the dried-out Caspian Sea

ALL MOD CONS *Turning a boring revolver into a monster*

1 SNIPER STOCK
A wooden grip from a hunting rifle. Greatly reduces recoil.

2 REGULAR BARREL
A long barrel that increases both damage and accuracy.

3 SCOPE 4X
A telescopic scope for zooming in.



4 6-SHOT CYLINDER
Massively increases the revolver's rate of fire.

5 RED LASER
Increases accuracy if you ever need to fire from the hip.

and beyond, the setting is constantly surprising and hauntingly beautiful. We've seen post-nuclear wastelands in a thousand videogames, but there's something about 4A's take on the concept that really creeps under your skin. A subtle air of hopelessness and melancholy that emphasises just how woefully tragic this world is.

But by reaching out into the wider world, *Metro* loses some of its identity. The Moscow Metro, and the weird communities and cultures that developed there after the bombs fell, is one of the most interesting things about the series. Some of what you encounter in *Exodus* is just as

imaginative, such as the origins of a strange tribe you encounter in a lush boreal forest. But elsewhere it feels like a post-apocalypse by numbers, with shanty towns and bloodthirsty raiders straight out of *Mad*

Max, and a general feeling that you're treading familiar irradiated ground.

BAD ACTING

Metro Exodus also has some problems with storytelling. For one, the English voice acting is, for the most part, terrible. I don't usually mind a bit of amateurish acting in games, but here it's so overdramatic that I actually found it distracting. There is the option to switch to Russian voices, which feels more authentic to the setting, but there's so much crosstalk that keeping track of the subtitles while playing is impractical. And there are too many scenes where you have to stand and wait as people heap big spoonfuls of exposition into your

ears, talking interminably about what you're going to do next rather than just letting you, you know, do it.

Between major locations you can explore the Aurora as it hurtles along the tracks to its next destination, and it's here where the real heart of the game lies. The overarching plot is enjoyable enough, but it's the interactions between the characters, and how they spend their downtime on the train, that I found the most resonant. You'll see a character serenading another with his guitar; someone looking wistfully out of a window as the scenery rolls by; people telling jokes and shooting the shit in the communal area. The sense of community here, of family, is palpable – which gives those moments when these people are in danger added weight.

By leaving the tunnels of the Moscow Metro behind, the artists and world-builders at 4A Games have created something incredible here. This voyage through a bleak Russian wasteland, from abandoned cities and burning deserts to autumnal forests and freezing tundras, is full of surprises and stunning scenery. It's just a shame your interaction with this brave new world largely consists of shooting at it.

Metro Exodus is, in many ways, a pretty rote FPS attached to a setting that deserves much better. But when the Aurora's brakes screech as it pulls into the next station, the excitement of what lies ahead always makes up for its shortcomings. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

An incredible trip through a stunning post-apocalyptic world, let down by some uninspiring FPS combat.

78



BOOZY BARBARIANS

Walk your barbarian hordes through the gates of Rome in **AT THE GATES**. By Fraser Brown

It was wine that finally took down the Romans. *At the Gates* is a 4X game where victory is only achieved if you conquer either the Eastern or Western Roman Empire, and facing what at first seemed like insurmountable odds, I turned to alcohol. It funded my war machine, kept the clans happy and the grapes fed everyone during winter food shortages. My burgeoning barbarian kingdom owed everything to its vineyards. That and the extremely sleepy AI.

My boozy realm was initially born out of necessity. *At the Gates* draws from a lot of different sources, from *Civilization* to worker placement games such as *Agricola*, but like a survival game, it's driven by harsh weather and resource scarcity. When you find a large source of food (or booze) you make the most of it.

Every playable barbarian faction is limited to a single city, though borders can still be expanded. My thirst for the delicious grape led me to expand north, building more vineyards there, but when they dried up, my workers moved on and the borders retreated. The barbarian kingdoms are agile, adaptable up-and-comers, in contrast to the inflexible Roman powerhouse.

At least they are when there's a player running the show. Otherwise, the barbarians seem pretty content to do very little at all, aside from pointlessly moving troops around within their own borders.

Instead of managing an empire, you'll spend most of your time managing people. Each clan is a single unit that can be assigned jobs that run the gamut from winemaker to priest. They're at the centre of

everything, so putting people in the right job is a big part of running a kingdom.

It's a bit more complex than just finding a hairy barbarian, giving them a briefcase and sending them on their way.

People are often abstract concepts in 4X games, distilled down to a simple resource or disposable units. But *At the Gates*' clans have some welcome humanity, reflected by their traits, both positive and negative, and desires. Some of my clans decided that they would much rather work inside the settlement, and they grew upset the longer they went ignored. In fairness, they were working in the snow. The weather creates a lot of obstacles, killing crops and hampering movement.

Putting people in the right job is a big part of running a kingdom

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A single-city 4X game where you have to take down the Romans

EXPECT TO PAY
£25

DEVELOPER
Conifer Games

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
GTX 1080Ti, Intel i7-8086K, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
None

LINK
www.atthegatesgame.com

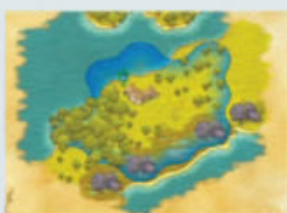
BUYER'S MARKET

Get a bit of cash in your pocket and all your worries about resource shortages will wash away, along with a lot of reasons to keep playing. Gathering up massive piles of gold is a lot easier than producing enough food to feed all of your clans, too. With only the occasional gold mine and one trade building, I was set for life. With my fat bank account I was able to go on shopping sprees every time the caravan – basically a shop – pulled up to the settlement, buying most of what I needed, then selling my excess wine. It's exploitable so buying and reselling the same item over and over nets you a profit, but I was never so hard up that I was tempted to use it.

Without adversity, *At the Gates* is a pretty straight line to Rome. Or Constantinople, if it's closer. My sauced up warriors – the wine helped with morale – marched across the world and, finally within the borders of the Eastern Roman Empire, proceeded to conquer every city one at a time. Every legion stayed behind the walls of its respective city. All it would have taken to crush my invasion was one tiny bit of teamwork, but they just sat there, passively waiting for the end. It was what I'd been working towards, but there was no satisfaction.

The ability to buy your way out of most problems and passive AI make it feel like you're taking advantage of an exploit even when you're playing it normally. *At the Gates*' challenge is meant to be a hook, but that wasn't apparent as I walked my hordes to victory. It undermines the survival elements and the underdog premise, leaving *At the Gates* with a bunch of novel 4X ideas that quickly fizzle out. ■

NOMADS NO MORE *Starting your settlement*



THE SETTLERS

Barbarians start off as nomadic, so before you put down some roots, you can pack up and head off to somewhere better.



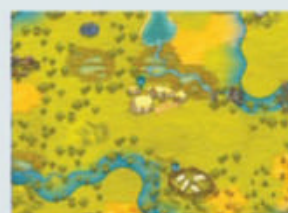
BRANCHING OUT

Since you only ever get one settlement, it's worth taking a bit of time to find the perfect spot with space to expand.



CLIMATE CHANGE

Maps are randomly generated, but climates approximate the real world, which gives you an idea of what to expect.



MEGALOMANIA

Eventually you'll be able to found a kingdom and say goodbye to nomadic life. You're now one step closer to conquering Rome.

PC GAMER

VERDICT

The passive AI and a flawed economy ruin what could have been a refreshing 4X experiment.

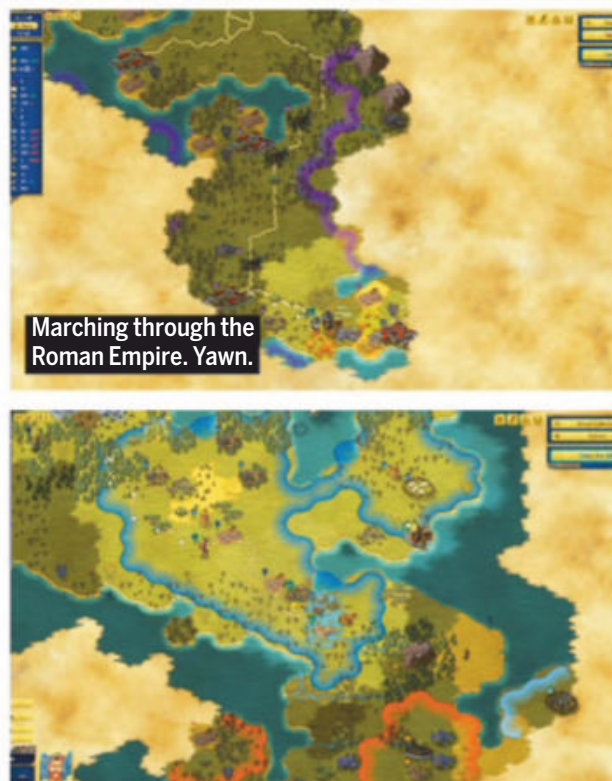
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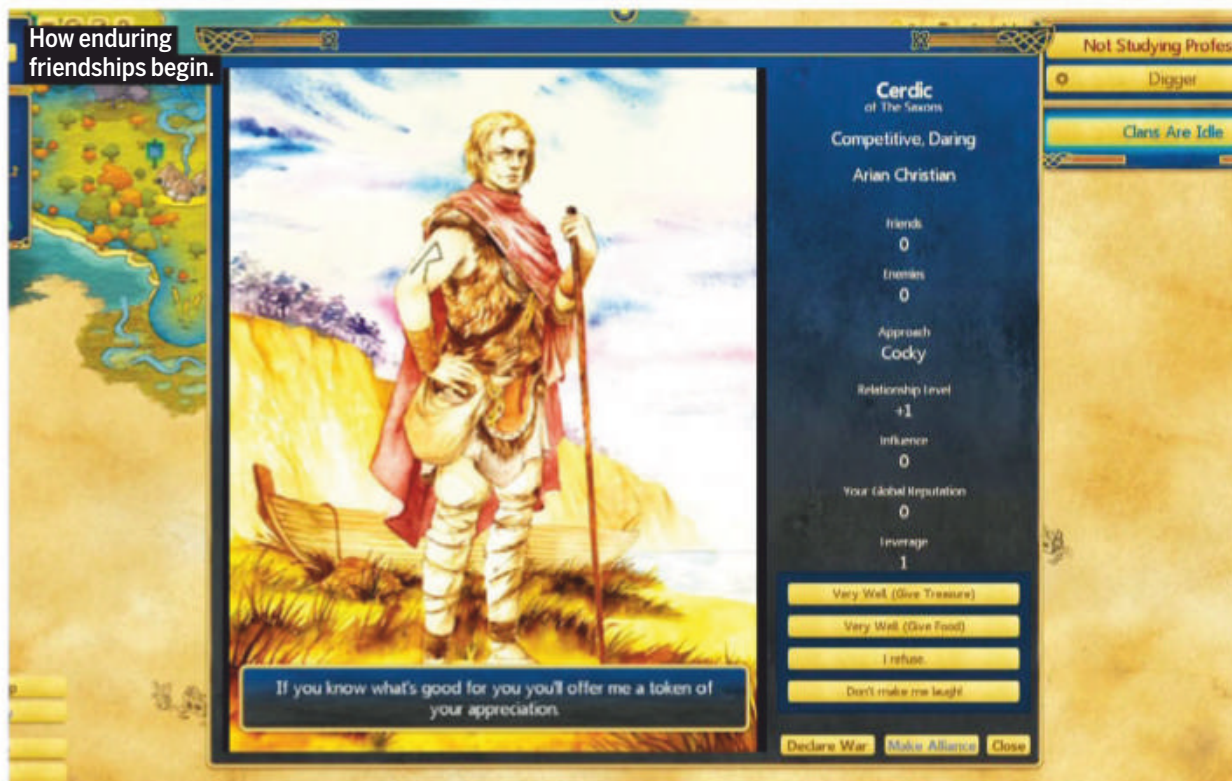
Some clans are better kept outside. For hygiene reasons.



Enemies are content to stay in their cities.



Marching through the Roman Empire. Yawn.



How enduring friendships begin.

DRAGON AGED

YAKUZA KIWAMI proves that the mid-2000s weren't as much fun as the 1980s. *By Phil Savage*

Welcome back to Kamurocho, the city district where nearly every problem can be solved by punching. A conman tries to scam you out of money? You can punch your way through that. A retired judo pro requests a tour of local nightlife? Yet more punching. An eccentric gangster engineers a series of increasingly elaborate attacks in an attempt to provoke you into fighting him? You get the idea.

Your oath brother murders the head of your crime family? That's a slightly trickier problem to solve. Instead series protagonist Kazuma Kiryu decides to take the fall, resulting in a ten-year prison sentence and his expulsion from the Tojo Clan. Kiryu returns to Kamurocho in 2005, only to learn that Nishikiyama – the man he willingly gave up a decade of his freedom for – has betrayed the clan, triggering a desperate battle for leadership. This, too, is a problem that can be solved by punching. A lot of punching, spread over many hours.

Yakuza Kiwami is, in other words, another *Yakuza* game, and will be instantly familiar to anyone who's played *Yakuza 0*. There's the slowly unfolding melodramatic crime drama, the slice-of-life sidequests, and the selection of minigames and activities, from bowling to karaoke to a questionable card battler about scantily clad women roleplaying as insects. It's both serious and silly, sometimes within the same cutscene,

but works because Kiryu is such an inherently likeable lead – calm, authoritative, naive and endearing.

If you haven't played *Yakuza 0*, go and do that first. As a remake of a 13-year-old game, even one with extra

features, *Kiwami* takes place entirely in Kamurocho and offers fewer side activities and less playful substories. It's a relic from a time before the series fully knew what it was, dressed up in the clothes of *Yakuza* at

its best. Perhaps it's best to think of *Yakuza Kiwami* as an expansion pack to *0*. It's by no means a bad game, but expectations need to be managed.

Yakuza Kiwami is a mostly faithful remake. Many of the cutscenes are shot-for-shot recreations of those found in the PlayStation 2 original. But *Kiwami* also adds new elements, both for better and worse. A clear improvement is the cutscenes added between each chapter that show what happened to Nishikiyama during the ten years Kiryu was away. They help to add further depth to the character and build nicely on his role

It's both serious and silly, sometimes within the same cutscene

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A remake of 2005's *Yakuza*, in the engine of *Yakuza 0*

EXPECT TO PAY
£15

DEVELOPER
Sega

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
GeForce GTX 1070, 16GB RAM, i5-6600k

MULTIPLAYER
Online minigames

LINK
yakuza.sega.com

in *Yakuza 0*. Less positive is what the remake does with Majima.

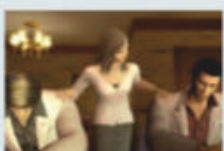
He's the star of a new system called Majima Everywhere, and it's a bit of a mess – a clunky way to shoehorn *Yakuza 0*'s second protagonist into a game he barely appeared in. When Kiryu returns from prison, Majima challenges him to a series of fights – ostensibly as a way to help him sharpen his edge after ten years away. Throughout the game he'll appear, either chasing you down on the streets or ambushing you out of bins and manholes and giant traffic cones.

MANY-PUNCH MAN

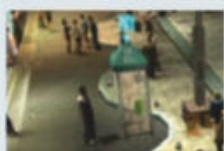
Some of the scenarios are entertaining, but the frequency and progression of the system means it quickly becomes tedious. *Yakuza Kiwami*'s combat system is just as explosive and entertaining as *0*'s (because it's exactly the same), but the lengthy, protracted battles against Majima at his highest ranks are more about repeated execution of a handful of counters. After a certain point, he's just not much fun to fight.

Despite everything I still recommend *Yakuza Kiwami*. If nothing else it's worth it for the story, which introduces characters and events that go on to shape the series as a whole. More than the internal disputes of the Tojo Clan or the peculiar friendship of Kiryu and Majima, the heart of the series' story revolves around Kiryu's relationship with Haruka. That makes *Yakuza Kiwami*, and the pair's initial meeting, an important part of the series as a whole. *Kiwami* is probably my least favourite *Yakuza* game, but it's still an evocative, detailed and largely entertaining gangster thriller full of charm and absurdity. ■

GLOW UP *What's new in the remake?*



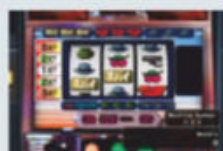
GRAPHICS
Kiryu looks older, and no longer sports an annoying, low-poly, shit-eating grin.



SAVING
The PC version features autosave. Even in 2005 the death of payphones was near.



DIALOGUE
The English voice acting has been replaced by the original Japanese. Sorry, Mark Hamill.



GAMBLING
Kiwami has some new minigames, but this irritating slot machine didn't make the cut.

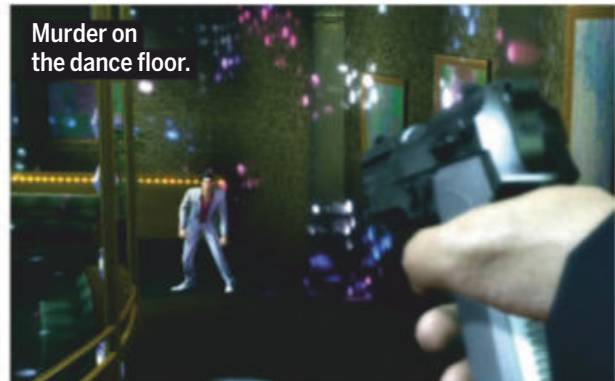


SINGING
According to this new montage, Kiryu's time in prison involved winter radishes.

PC GAMER VERDICT

Suffers in comparison to *Yakuza 0*, but is still a compelling drama and an important part of the series as a whole.

74



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magazine?

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PCGAMER.COM

techradar.



The home of technology

techradar.com

GO SLOW

MY TIME AT PORTIA is hungry for your evenings. *By Philippa Warr*

My Time at Portia is slow. Achingly slow at times. So slow, in fact, that it sometimes feels like it should be an idle game and I have to fight the urge to tab away and check back later. The game is a sandboxy life sim in the mould of *Stardew Valley* or *Animal Crossing*. It sees you take over your dad's dilapidated workshop and attempt to restore it to prosperity, one commission at a time.

So far so familiar. But *My Time at Portia* oscillates between being just enough of an engaging take on a comforting genre to draw you in, and an infuriating me-too whose glacial pace steals more of your time than it deserves.

After the usual tutorial-type gubbins, the first significant commission you receive from the mayor is for a bridge to connect Portia to Amber Island – a little spit of land near your workshop. You'll need two Wooden Bridge Heads (basically the on and off ramps for the bridge) and one Wooden Bridge Body. You can construct one segment at a time using a crafting platform called the Assembly Station.

But the Bridge Heads need three copper pipes and five hardwood planks each. Hardwood comes from the big trees nearby, but the axe you crafted for the tutorial isn't strong enough so you must smelt copper and tin (obtained via mining trips to the abandoned ruins or hacking away at stones) to make bronze bars and

buy an expensive (for this stage in the game) upgrade kit from a local store. You now have the ability to get hardwood!

Progress felt ... like it was being throttled by resource requirements

But you need hardwood planks not hardwood, so you'll need a cutter. Cutters need two copper blades and five stone bricks. You go back to the furnace to make the bricks, but the copper blades come from a grinder, and a grinder requires two old parts, three copper bars and two grinding stones. So it's back to the ruins for old parts, copper ore and stone, then to the furnace and worktable to refine some of the materials into a usable format. Don't forget you'll need extra copper ore to refine into the copper bars which can then be ground to form the copper pipes. Oh, and you have to fuel the furnace and the grinder so you'll need a whole lot of wood (as distinct from hardwood) and power stones.

After this, the Bridge Body is relatively straightforward, although still a slog in terms of the time and

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A life sim whose slow pace overshadows what it does well

EXPECT TO PAY
£25

DEVELOPER
Pathea Games

PUBLISHER
Team 17

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-5820k,
GTX 970, 16GB RAM,
Windows 10

MULTIPLAYER
None

LINK
portia.pathea.net

energy it takes to actually craft everything. Obtaining each of these parts teaches you how the game's production loops work, but calling it one mission instead of about eight separate missions is the problem. It means spending hours and hours in the early game, chipping away at a monumental task without a drip feed of encouragement.

PERSISTENCE OF TIME

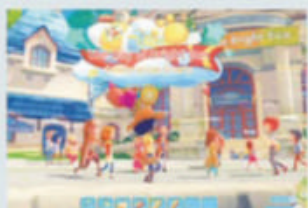
Outside the crafting missions and commissions, the systems are a mixed bag. The fighting is dull – slash, slash, slash, dodge roll is pretty much all you need. The villagers aren't very engaging, so I have no desire to cultivate friendships or romances. The farming is... fine? Seasonal celebrations are fun but involve minigames of variable quality. And the home decor and fashion are too tied to stats boosts for a decorative approach to really work.

By being so slow, *My Time at Portia* both repels and appeals. It offers a kind of gaming oasis, making few demands and just pootling along.

That type of thing can be a place of respite for the right player or the right mood. But when I wasn't in the right mood progress felt artificially slow – like it was being throttled by resource requirements, forcing you to play longer than feels good.

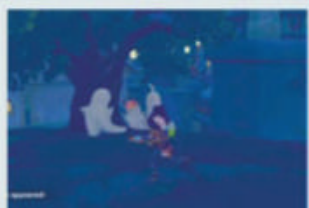
To give you a sense of this, I've put about 40 hours into my save and I think I'm less than a third of the way through the main questline. I've spent some of that time completing secondary quests, taking on workshop commissions and so on. For the right player, that will feel like phenomenal value for money. For everyone else I suspect the busywork will eventually prove too much of a bore to stick with it. ■

FESTIVE FUN *Special holidays come with seasonal events*



DAY OF THE BRIGHT SUN

Follow an airship as it drops presents (push townsfolk aside to grab the best loot).



DAY OF MEMORIES

A moment of silence for the dead quickly deteriorates into a stun-gun fight over Ghost Badges.



WINTER SOLSTICE

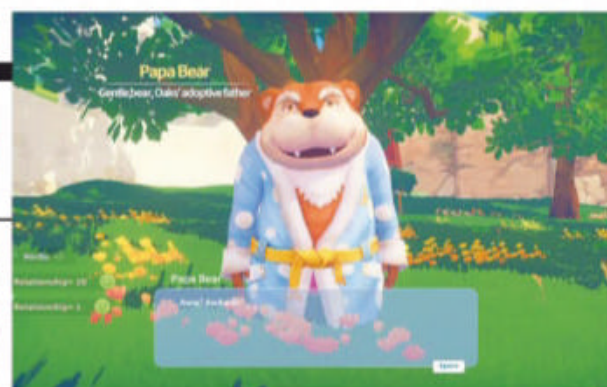
Gather round a giant casserole and contribute to a hotpot – adding the right produce boosts friendships.

PC GAMER VERDICT

A glacial pace and abundance of busywork make *My Time at Portia* a tough recommendation.

63

No comment.



Dungeon runs can yield rare rewards.



Big mood.



CRY AGAIN

FAR CRY NEW DAWN is Far Cry 5 again, but with a post-apocalyptic paint job. *By Chris Livingston*

You'd think a nuke being dropped on Montana would have changed it somewhat, but *Far Cry New Dawn's* post-apocalyptic version of Hope County is essentially the same one we know from *Far Cry 5*. *New Dawn* adds a couple of new twists to the series' formula but nothing to make it feel like a wholly different game. This is *Far Cry 5* again, just on a smaller scale and with a lot more pink flowers.

It's years after the nukes fell at the end of *Far Cry 5*, and your nameless character has been travelling the country by rail, helping survivors rebuild the post-apocalyptic United States. A group of highwaymen (not that cleverly called the 'Highwaymen') derail your train and leave you stranded. After making your way to a small community called Prosperity, you venture out into the overgrown remains of Hope County, fighting the Highwaymen, conquering outposts, gathering resources for crafting, and enlisting a small cadre of companions like an elderly sniper and an enormous boar. This goes without saying, but never bring the sniper with you. Always bring the boar.

As you help out the locals you gain perk points that can be used to unlock skills in any order you wish, a nice and loose ability system that lets you focus on whatever is most

important to your playstyle, be it melee damage, stealth kills, or traversal tools like the wingsuit and grappling hook. A set of five new skills introduced near the end of the game indulge a bit more

ridiculousness, giving you fun powers like a double jump and limited-time berserker strength. Now when I swing my spiked baseball bat at a bear it sails comically through the air. These powers seem fresh for a bit, but

feel a little unnecessary when I'm already able to insta-kill with stealth takedowns and spawn an endless supply of helicopters.

Combat is the same frantic and fun gunplay as in the past few *Far Cry* games. Vehicles and barrels explode, fire spreads across grass and trees, enemies recklessly charge and scream and bombard you with mortars or light you up with flamethrowers, with the occasional

Far Cry 5 was only just last year so it's not exactly a nostalgia trip

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Far Cry 5, but smaller

EXPECT TO PAY
£38

DEVELOPER
Ubisoft Montreal

PUBLISHER
Ubisoft

REVIEWED ON
Intel i5-6600K @ 3.50 GHz, 8 GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce GTX 980

MULTIPLAYER
Co-op

LINK
far-cry.ubisoft.com/game/en-gb/home

wild animal or friendly citizen getting caught up in the chaos.

COUNTY LINES

There are plenty of familiar landmarks on this smaller version of the map (radiation has closed off a portion of it) and several familiar (yet older) characters from the last game are still around. I think we're meant to feel a bit wistful about Hope County – a quest has you collecting old photographs to help you remember what the landscape looked like before the bombs – but it's hard to feel like there's much difference between the world's chaotic past and present, and *Far Cry 5* was only just last year so it's not exactly a nostalgia trip. You can make a few expeditions out of Montana, raiding larger and more imaginative enemy outposts off the main map, like an aircraft carrier on the coast and even Alcatraz.

The big bads of *New Dawn*, twin sisters Mickey and Lou, are so inconsequential I almost forgot to mention them. Unlike the Seed family in *Far Cry 5*, they aren't constantly subjecting you to long, drawn out speeches (thank you). The twins only appear a few times, and mostly just issue brief threats over the radio to remind you they exist.

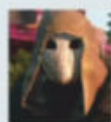
I completed the main story quest in about a dozen hours, and spent a few more mopping up side-quests and exploring. It's brief compared to *Far Cry 5*, and completable without fully upgrading Prosperity to access the highest levels of gear and vehicles (though you'll definitely want to unlock the best weapons).

While it's good fun at times, *New Dawn* is really just a quick trip back to *Far Cry 5's* Montana that hasn't changed much beyond a post-apocalyptic paint job. ■

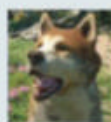
PIG MOOD *The eight companions ranked*



HORATIO
Tank/Boar
Can knock over cars and self-revive. Snores when he sleeps. Is a boar.
100/100



THE JUDGE
Hunter/Enigma
Uses a bow. Never speaks. Wears mask. Wait, is this your character from 5? **95/100**



TIMBER
Scout/Dog
Cute dog who rides in your sidecar. Loses a few points for not being a boar.
90/100



GINA
Heavy Gunner/Badass
Drives a car with a mounted gun. Endless ammo. Nuff said. **80/100**



NANA
Sniper/Granny
You wouldn't expect a kind old granny to be good at sniping. That's the joke.
70/100



CARMINA
Assaulter/Buzzkill
Dark past. Throws dynamite when she's not talking about her dark past. **60/100**



JEROME
Berserker/Pastor
Likes to set things on fire. But so do I. Don't steal my thunder, dude. **50/100**



HURK
RPG/Yokel
Talks way too much. Blows stuff up real good. But damn, shut up. **40/100**

PC GAMER VERDICT

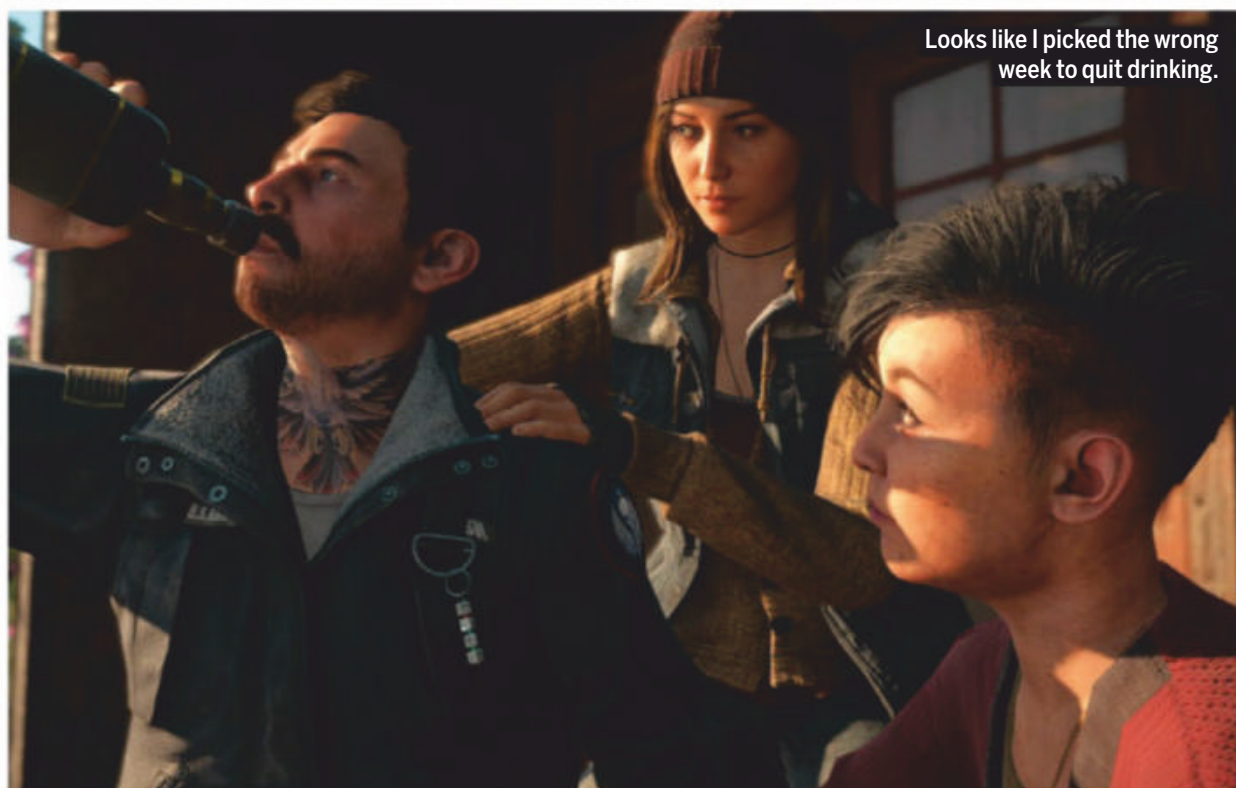
Somewhat like *Primal* before it, *New Dawn* is a layer of post-nuke paint spread over the familiar *Far Cry* experience.

70

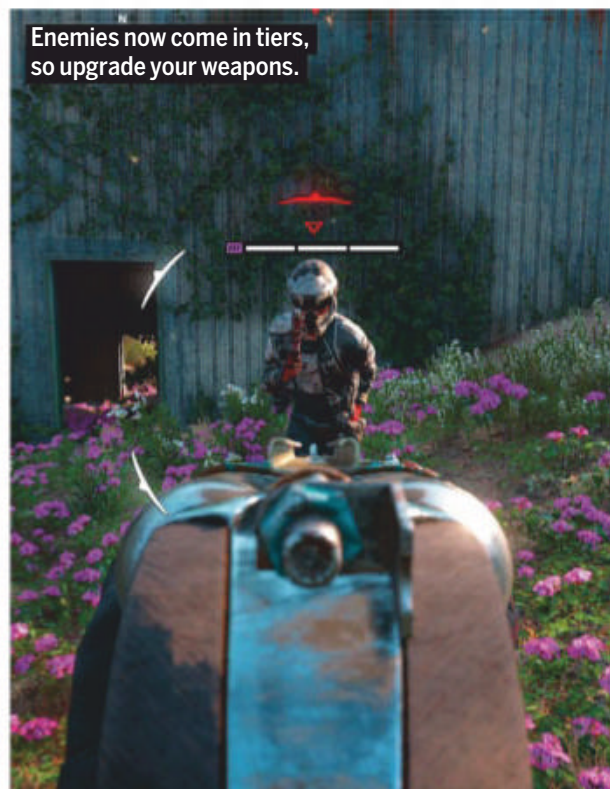
Feeling a bit OP by the end.



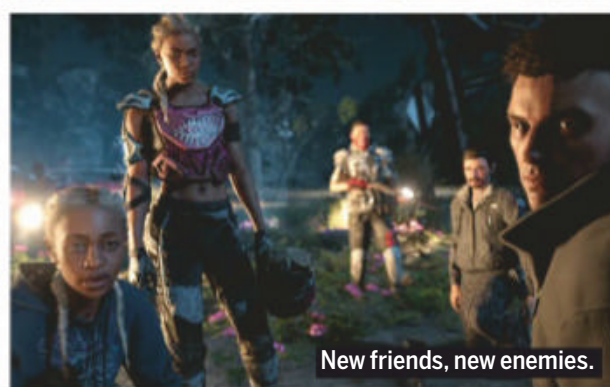
Looks like I picked the wrong week to quit drinking.



Enemies now come in tiers, so upgrade your weapons.



Good boy.



HEATING UP

CIVILIZATION VI: GATHERING STORM is a great expansion full of disasters and politicking that stumbles at the end. *By Fraser Brown*

Civilization VI: Gathering Storm turns climate change into an end boss. After thousands of years of progress and expansion, the surviving civilisations have another hurdle to jump over, one that's ostensibly greater and more complex than any they've encountered before. It throws plans into disarray, transforms the map and can't be overcome by armies or culture. It's the most exciting Civilization has been in ages.

For most of history, civs have barely any impact on the climate. It's not until resources like coal and oil start being exploited that CO2 emissions start to increase and transform the map, mostly through rising sea levels. Foul weather, earthquakes and volcanic eruptions, however, can interfere with your empire-building plans whenever, so nature is a persistent adversary.

The very first choice you make after picking a civ – there are eight new ones, and nine new leaders – is finding a hex to settle on, typically on your first turn. Straight away, *Gathering Storm* flings a few more decisions into the mix.

If you're playing as the Maori, for instance, you start at sea and get bonuses for every turn you choose to forgo putting down roots, though that also leaves you incredibly vulnerable to barbarian attacks.

The Phoenicians get more flexibility later on, thanks to their

ability to move their capital to any other city with their unique harbour, the cothon.

There are some unusual twists among the expanded roster that make them stand out even as the list grows massive. If you've got a hankering for conquest, Hungary is a particularly interesting choice. It's a civ built for war, but it only reaches its full potential when it's surrounded by friends. It can get enhanced

levy troops from city-state buddies, while one of its unique units gets stronger the more allies you have. Diplomacy is one of the most important weapons in its arsenal, and *Gathering Storm* conveniently gives you more ways to wield it.

WHERE TO SETTLE

No matter the civ you're playing, you'll still need to spend a bit more time considering where to establish your first city. Plonking your capital

Gathering Storm flings a few more decisions into the mix

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A 4X expansion full of natural disasters and politicking

EXPECT TO PAY
£35

DEVELOPER
Firaxis Games

PUBLISHER
2K

REVIEWED ON
GTX 1080Ti, Intel i7-8086K, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
www.civilization.com

right on a flood plain puts all of the improvements and districts at risk of destruction, while making your home near a volcano is just asking for trouble. There are rewards for taking those risks, though, notably the increased fertility of the nearby hexes. Despite being random events, you can still plan; you can still build the potential risks and rewards into your strategy.

GROUP EFFORT

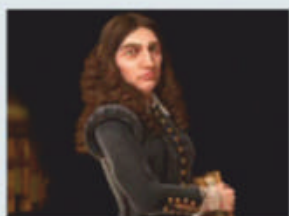
While climate change is complicated, *Gathering Storm* keeps it easy to parse, focusing on a few specific sources. Strategic resources like coal can be burned for fuel to enhance certain modern and later buildings, while some units require a constant supply or you won't be able to use them. They're important resources, then, but they're also the reason CO2 levels rise. So you have some pretty big, but thankfully clear, choices to make. Swearing off oil might cost you some units and force you to spend time switching your cities to a new power source, but it will also slow down the changes.

It's a very different kind of threat from an aggressive neighbour. Disaster can strike anywhere on the map, though some places are at greater risk than others. From the modern age onward, buildings and projects appear that can mitigate things like flooding or rising sea levels, but that's time and resources you might not be able to afford. But that's when your aggressive neighbour might save you.

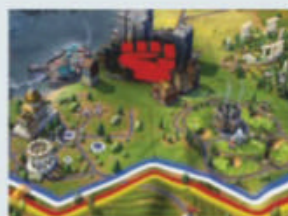
Gathering Storm doesn't treat natural disasters or climate change as the concerns of individual civs. Through the World Congress, motions can be put to the other civs, creating an emergency event where everyone is called on to send aid to the victim of the disaster.

Like other emergencies, they're framed as competitions, which each civ attempts to excel in, whether it's at being very charitable or stopping Katherine of Sweden from converting

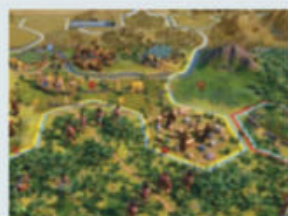
HURT FEELINGS *The war of reputations*



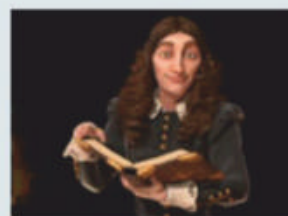
OUT WITH THE OLD
The warmonger system has gone and is replaced by grievances. The more you upset other leaders, the more grievances they'll have with you.



PEOPLE MATTER
You should care about your enemy's people. If you capture a city, it's going to be difficult to hold onto it if everyone thinks you're a monster.



GOSSIP CAN BE FATAL
The allies of the civ you've wronged might also turn against you, hearing from their mate that you're not to be trusted.



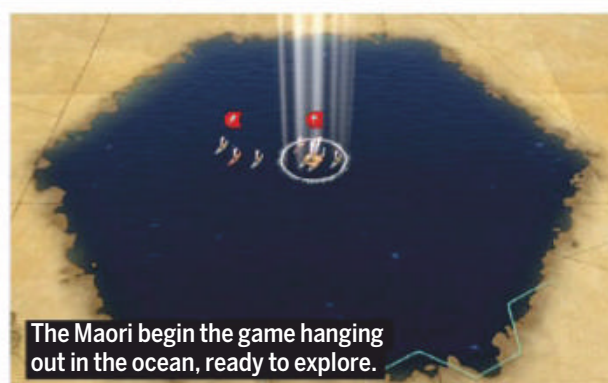
SHORT MEMORIES
Anger another civ enough and you'll piss off the whole world. Don't worry, they're a forgiving bunch, and all of their beefs are forgotten over time.



Giant killer robots should be kept far away from wonders. And probably people.



Well then, I guess that's Earth cancelled.



The Maori begin the game hanging out in the ocean, ready to explore.



It looks like those sheep are in for a chilly winter.



At least all the extra water is nice for the boats. They're in heaven.



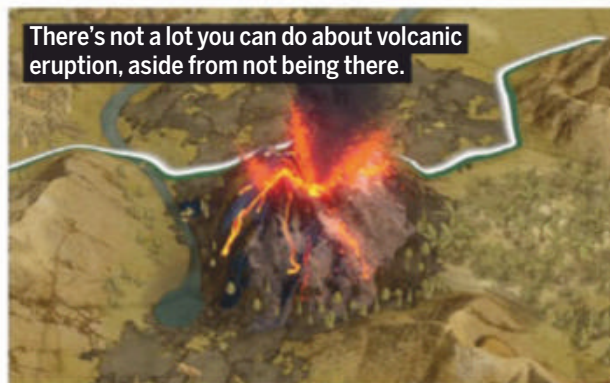
Everyone comes to this park to admire the natural beauty of... cannons.



Robots just shrug off climate change. They'll be fine.



In the future, we'll all be living in domes.



There's not a lot you can do about volcanic eruption, aside from not being there.



You can build dams and seawalls when the water rises, but it won't stop everything.

➤ another city to Taoism. Using the World Congress becomes even more important as the danger increases. It's all well and good to look at the melting polar ice caps and say "OK, I'm going to buy a Tesla and go vegan", but it takes an international, political effort to make a tangible difference. I shut down my oil platforms and coal mines, I decommissioned my ships and planes, but even then the seas continued to rise.

It took international legislation banning certain power plants and some friendly competition between civs to make a dent.

Always it's a competition, which suits *Civilization* nicely. The impending ecological disaster is a good showcase of the new diplomacy system, but you'll end up becoming very familiar with it long before the glaciers start vanishing.

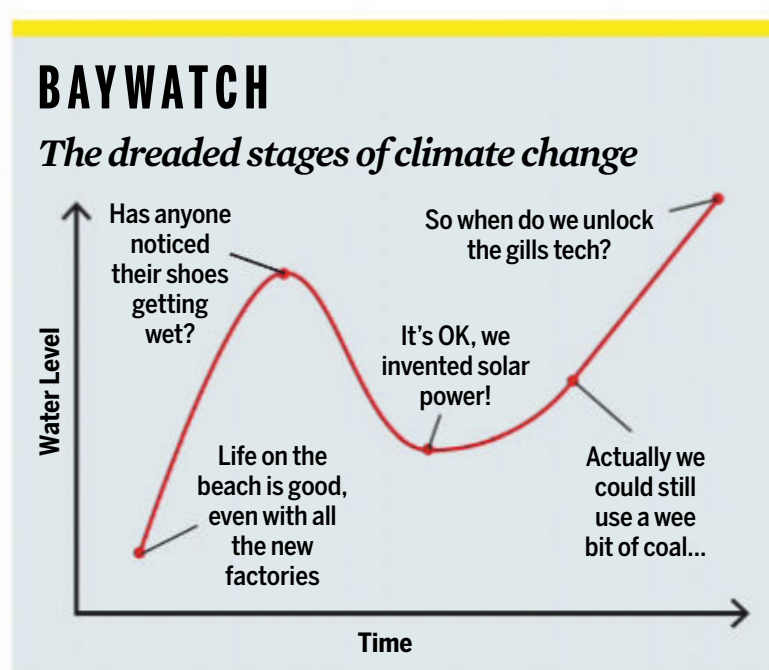
Diplomatic favour funds each civ's international clout. It's a resource that can be traded for both the tangible, like gold or artefacts, and the fleeting, like promises. Competing in international events, helping out during emergencies and making allies will earn you some, too.

When the World Congress meets, that favour translates into votes, letting you try to push your agenda at the global level.

I've become a very two-faced leader, I confess. In person it's all smiles and assurances, but the moment the World Congress convenes, I'm there with a knife behind my back. "Yeah, Trajan, we're good buddies," I say as I spend all of my favour to neuter his army. Instead of a diplomatic victory hinging on you making everyone like you, it depends on you making deals, competing in international events and wisely spending favour. Sure, alliances and becoming the suzerain of a city-state will net you favour, but there are several routes to winning the political game, and being a sneaky wheeler and dealer is one of them.

This is certainly the most engaging diplomacy has been in *Civilization VI*, and perhaps in the series. Other *Civilizations* have modelled global diplomacy and politics, but not at this scale and definitely not so woven into the fabric of the game. *Rise and Fall* got the ball rolling, but it's *Gathering*

Certainly the most engaging diplomacy has been in *Civilization VI*



Storm that turns diplomacy into a clear strategy and makes it instrumental in fixing new problems that involve everyone.

Even though it's still competitive, there are unifying moments where every civ makes some sacrifices to right the ship.

PAUSING ARMAGEDDON

The setup for the end game – if it all goes wrong, anyway – is pretty dramatic. The coast has been swallowed up by the ocean, natural disasters are increasing in occurrence

and whole industries, previously reliant on fossil fuels, are shutting down. Every inch of the world, or what remains, is already in use, so expansion can only come in the form of conquest. It's all very World War III. And

then... it just stops.

Climate change just sort of ends. During the final phase, 85 per cent of the ice caps melt and disasters start jumping up by a couple of percent, but then there's just no more climate change. In my large continents map, just over 70 hexes were swallowed by the sea, which did submerge an island and make some of the coast unusable, but it was surmountable, especially once I unlocked technology that allowed me to build habitats in the ocean.

The habitats, called seasteads, are one of the new techs that appear during the future era. They're handy, and there's something about building homes in the water that calls to mind *Alpha Centauri*, which is never a bad thing, but otherwise the new era is a

bit of a dud. The scope is very narrow, in what is otherwise an ambitious expansion. Most of the techs just seem to improve the flashy sci-fi unit you can now construct: a giant killer robot. It's tough, silly, and I won't deny that smashing up enemy cities with giant death machines is fun, but with a few of them built, the future era quickly runs out of new things. It's unfortunately brief and largely extraneous.

With no more changes on the horizon and the sea levels settling, all those self-imposed limits can be lifted, returning the endgame to something a bit more traditional.

I kept waiting for the final crescendo, some awful apocalypse, but it never came. I was acting under the illusion that we were trying to stave off the end of all human civilisation, but this seems less urgent. It's still best to avoid it, but knowing that it fizzles out robs it of some of its power.

JUST DENY IT

It's the journey to that end scenario, whether you stop climate change or not, where *Gathering Storm* has the most impact. The new emergencies, cooperation and the effect of climate change even on war can dramatically change the game, even if you know that the end of the world never arrives. The choice of map also makes a difference. Playing on an archipelago or on islands, for instance, ensures that a huge amount of damage will be done before the climate meter stops moving. And, as always, you can exert some control over the random maps, tweaking properties like initial sea levels and resource abundance. If challenge is what you want, you can still find it.

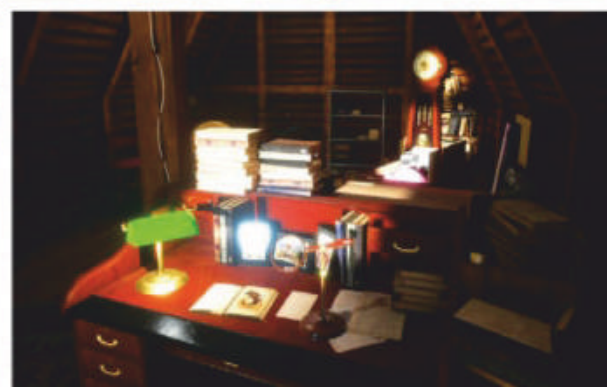
Civilization VI: Gathering Storm bites off a lot, but it proves more than capable of juggling big concepts like climate change and global diplomacy. It turns them into coherent but still complex systems that you'll constantly be interacting with, even before you start noticing that the beaches are vanishing. The climax doesn't live up to the build-up, but *Civilization VI* is still a richer game for all the expansion brings. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Gathering Storm is an ambitious expansion full of welcome additions, even if it does falter at the end.

81

What Never Was



CLOCK AND KEY

There's a cache in the attic in puzzler **WHAT NEVER WAS**. By Tom Sykes

Your grandpa has died, leaving a lifetime's worth of possessions in his dusty attic: piles of empty Werther's Original packets, stacks of *Reader's Digest* magazines, and a third stereotypical granddad thing. Except, in this accomplished first-person puzzle game, it's not like that at all. Turns out your granddad was a rad dude – an explorer and occultist with a collection of mystical doodads to uncover, and a library of magical research just waiting to be rifled through by yours truly.

As his granddaughter, Sarah, you've decided to take on the mammoth task of sorting all his old stuff. That means examining documents, manhandling drawers, and generally prodding every interesting-looking thing you come across, with Sarah narrating your exploration at nearly every click. For a free game, it's impressive how much voice-acting has been crammed into such a small space, and that it compares favourably to many commercial indie games.

SECRET STASH

You'll learn about your grandpa, but also about yourself as you walk around the beautifully sunlit roof space, investigating an old N64 with a ridiculous made-up console name, admiring an elegant typewriter that

has mysteriously ended up in the loft, or delving into your inventory to look at your student ID, discovering what your character looks like.

There's more story and more, well, *stuff* here than there strictly needs to be, but the result is a world that feels fleshed-out and well-developed, despite being constrained to one small room.

That room, by the way, has been rendered expertly, with the aid of

some lovely lighting effects and the occasional reminder of the player character in the form of her arms – appendages you don't find in many first-person puzzle games.

It's those arms, I think, that separate *What Never Was* from, say, *Myst* or *The Witness*. You're an actual character here, rather than a faceless, puzzle-solving stranger – and, you

There's more story and more, well, stuff here than there needs to be

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A first-person puzzle game set in your grandpa's attic

EXPECT TO PAY

Free

DEVELOPER

Alexander Hallgren

PUBLISHER

In-house

REVIEWED ON

AMD A4-6300@3.7GHz, 6GB RAM, GeForce GT 610

MULTIPLAYER

None

LINK

bit.ly/WhatNeverWas

know what? It's a comfortable fit. This is *Gone Home* meets *The Room* – or it would be, if only there was more to it.

Of course, this is a free game made (largely) by a single person, so while the production values are through the roof, this is a fairly brief experience as a result. It never quite blooms into a fully-fledged walking sim or a full-fat puzzle game, telling an unresolved story and abandoning your brain, just after it's been warmed up.

However, there's still enough to this puzzler to keep you busy over, say, a lunch break. You'll need to combine in-game research with hands-on mechanical fiddling to get to the bottom of its mystery, and see your grandfather's magical obsession through to the end. That end is just as lavish as the rest of the adventure, the game surprising even in its final moments with a sequence that hints at more *What Never Was* to come. I hope there is a follow-up, and that I return to the attic, as I didn't manage to clear out any of Grandpa's stuff... ■

PC GAMER

VERDICT

A snack rather than a full meal, this first-person puzzler still impresses with its detailed, tactile world.

82

BEST FRIENDS

Being a nice nuisance in **Z'S ROOM**. By Tom Sykes

This is a game about being a good friend, which at times means being a slightly annoying one. As an anthropomorphic bunny named Aaron, you've arrived at your friend Zoey's house to, well, keep her company, as she's clearly suffering from depression and in no mood to leave her bed, let alone the house.

A lot goes unsaid in this lovely little adventure game, as you explore the environs of your friend's tiny bedroom. You're not there to have a deep, intimate conversation with Zoey – you're there to briefly get her out of her head, and the best way to do that is to mess about with that crystal thingy sending new age vibes around her bedroom, nosey around on her computer and games console, and generally disturb her many possessions in the cheeky manner of someone that truly cares.

That's not to say that glimmers of backstory won't come through as you rifle. Investigate her console and you'll learn that she's sold all her games, seemingly as a result of her depression. Log onto her PC and you'll find that she's been playing a puzzle game where the ultimate goal is to acquire some friends.

It's a quietly affecting story, but the only thing you can do – the only thing that will really help – is simply being there with her.

And so, you be there. You complete the puzzle game, you pull down that weird poster (then, after she complains, carefully put it back up), you try to play a tune on her crappy old keyboard. Eventually, having investigated/messed with everything, you talk to Zoey once more. She thanks you for being there, and the game ends. What a personal, meaningful little story. ■

83



NEED TO KNOW

DEVELOPER
shockpine

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
shockpine.itch.io

GOATY EDITION

Uncover secrets in **THE GOAT CRONE**. By Tom Sykes

The latest in an anthology exploring a realm of science fiction weirdness, *Tales from the Outer Zone: The Goat Crone* feels markedly different from the futuristic adventuring of the previous game. Where *Cyborg Seppuku* looked like a fancy Moebius painting brought to life, *The Goat Crone* is far grittier, a little more messily drawn, in a way that entirely fits with the creepy horror story at its core.

You play as a young woman who has to care for her infant brother, scavenge and cook the dinner, while her father does unspecified business in the nearby forest – an area strictly off-limits to fearful Alma. It's a game that grabs your attention right off the bat with a particularly horrible puzzle involving the baby – a puzzle that, thankfully, it doesn't commit to. From then on the tension never

subsides, as you explore the bounds of your old-fashioned settlement collecting ingredients for the evening's dinner – a goal that entails a handful of basic puzzles.

But while these are fairly menial in nature, the story should hold your attention through to the end. You'll want to know what lies in the spooky forest, and you'll need to know what the deal is with the horrifying Goat Crone – a witch-like spectre that haunts your every step.

Ultimately, the game doesn't quite manage to stick the landing, impressing with its final vista but never delivering on the underlying tension. Unanswered questions are fine, but you're not rewarded for your investment in the story, which merely ends, somewhat appropriately, on a cliff. Play *The Goat Crone* for the atmosphere, which is rich and dark like a witch's broth. ■

72



NEED TO KNOW

DEVELOPER
TheOuterZone

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
theouterzone.itch.io

BREAKING THE ICE

A warm reception for
SUBNAUTICA: BELOW ZERO. By Philippa Warr

Around 200m away is an Interesting Hole. I know this because I put a beacon in it and labelled it “Interesting Hole”. This is because when I found the interesting hole – actually a promising series of openings leading further into in a biome of beautifully twisting rock formations – I was low on food, water, and health. I needed to swim back to the safety of my little survival pod and sort myself out before braving an interesting hole.

Below Zero is the spawn of 2018’s success story, *Subnautica*. *Subnautica* is a spectacular alien underwater survival sandbox from Unknown Worlds. *Below Zero* is one of those “expandalone” projects where the developers can work on ideas related to the main game, but in a separate space, so without the same constraints and without the risk of disrupting the original.

Below Zero is set a year after the events of *Subnautica* and thus builds on that game’s story arc. In case you haven’t played or haven’t finished the latter, I’ll stick to broad *Below Zero* impressions, to avoid spoilers.

It’s so good! There are baby alien penguins! There are new biomes to explore! There are new Interesting Holes to accidentally run out of oxygen in! There are new fish! The story bits that are in place are really promising and seem to be heading in a really interesting direction!

But it also feels like *Subnautica*! It has the same core loops, and types of tech. You collect titanium, copper, bits of kelp and so on, then return to

your habitat’s fabricator to turn them into tools, fabric, parts, diving equipment. Gradually you are able to go further, faster, deeper. You finally start to have a surplus of materials instead of living a hand-to-crafting station existence.

Familiar mechanics, like hovering over a plant which produces air bubbles to refill your oxygen while underwater, return in slightly different forms. In this case the bubble plants are replaced by

arctic equivalents – a fish you can basically huff from, and a plant with a translucent sac that gradually fills with air which you can use for a small puff of O2.

You can be harmed, killed or surprised by some of the same things as in *Subnautica* but there is also now a creature which can straight-up punch you, and something which I decided to catch with my hands and which either stings or stabs you. Either way it went badly.

The whole sense is of a world you already know, but with regional variations in the flora and fauna, and a year’s worth of slight changes at

There are baby alien penguins!
There are new biomes to explore!

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
An expandalone survival sandbox set one year after the original game

EXPECT TO PAY
£15.50

DEVELOPER
Unknown Worlds Entertainment

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
Windows 10, 16GB RAM, Intel Core i7-5820k, GeForce GTX 970

MULTIPLAYER
None
unknownworlds.com/subnautica

Alterra (the firm you work for) both in the corporation’s understanding of the world and its tech.

Unknown Worlds warns that “*Below Zero* is full of bugs, runs poorly, and includes only a small portion of our planned features.” It’s sensible to set Early Access expectations for those who might otherwise dive in, hungry for more after mining out *Subnautica*. But my experience was far more robust than that disclaimer might suggest.

Some animations are a bit weird, some of the assets are clearly placeholders, some of the voiced lines and the subtitles don’t match – that kind of thing.

DEEP BLUE SEA

The only technical problems I encountered were a couple of crashes. One came unexpectedly and served as a reminder of the necessity of saving frequently. The other I’d guess was a result of me hammering the in-game screenshot button to get a good shot of the lightning effect during a storm on the planet.

So it’s a little rough around the edges, and I reached the limit of the current story content after about four hours. I might play a bit longer so that I’ve explored as much as this early slice can show me, but after that I’ll be doing what I did with *Subnautica*’s Early Access run, keeping tabs on general development but saving the specifics for when they’re ready for a full release.

You can pick up *Below Zero* having not played *Subnautica*. But to do so would immediately immerse you in a narrative which builds on the original’s reveals and surprises. It wouldn’t ruin the earlier game’s story, but it would change the experience drastically. So if you’re considering *Below Zero* and haven’t played *Subnautica*, play *Subnautica*. ■

PC GAMER **EARLY ACCESS**
Already a robust experience, *Below Zero* is a promising look at a new part of *Subnautica*’s world.

FAMILIAR FACES *As well as new fauna, you’ll meet with old friends*



BLADDERFISH
A boggle-eyed fish you can grab by the throat and use to purify water.



BOOMERANG
Presumably, this fish will always return to you if you chuck it away.



EYEYE
If these beasts ever learn to shoal it will be utterly terrifying.



HOOPFISH
Victorian children would play games by pairing this with the Stickfish.



Yes, sex is good, but have you ever experienced a richly detailed Victorian police station?



THE GREAT GAME

Homicide is still homely in **SHERLOCK HOLMES: CRIMES AND PUNISHMENTS**

Going back to this game is bittersweet, like finding a lost hamster between the cushions of your sofa. Yes, it's been dead for years – but by God, you loved it while it was alive. It's nice having all those happy half-memories creep back, even if they are accompanied by the wistful realisation we're unlikely to see the likes of *Crimes and Punishments* again.

The culprit in this case is an awkward sequel. *Sherlock Holmes: The Devil's Daughter* stripped away much of what was loveable about Frogwares' detective game, turning Watson into a latte-art version of himself and adding edge where none was needed, like a Pomeranian in plate armour.

Crimes and Punishments, however, still feels like the cosiest adaptation of Conan Doyle. Holmes is crisp and aloof, like a digitised Jeremy Brett. Watson is essentially a helpful cabbage. And the locations all resemble seaside 'experiences' – the sort of place where you pay the price of a sandwich to amble through a house decorated to look like a smuggler's hidy-hole. Because of this, returning to *Crimes and Punishments* after time away feels warm and relaxing. Each new mystery has the

nostalgic glow of a childhood holiday destination without the rotting piers and frightening pubs.

GUM (STUCK ON) SHOE

My favourite area is still Evesham train station – a narrative invention that accidentally ends up being precisely like 18 places that really exist in the UK. It's a mist-shrouded carbuncle on the line to nowhere, inhabited by the hopeless and heated by a tiny stove. It feels cold, damp, and dreadful. Like many locations in the game, it's dense, interesting,

and immersive. (And I love that this section ends with Holmes and Watson solving the mystery by making their own pretend railroad car, like two chipper urchins imagineering with a discarded crate.)

This leads me to the other thing I appreciate about *Crimes and*

**Holmes is
crisp and aloof,
like a
digitised
Jeremy Brett**

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

Agreeable detective game where everything can go the right kind of wrong.

EXPECT TO PAY
£20

DEVELOPER
Frogwares

PUBLISHER
Focus Home Interactive

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-7700 CUP
@ 3.60GHz, 16 GB RAM,
NVIDIA GeForce GTX
1070, Windows 10

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
bit.ly/2yGDDqR

Punishments – it's entirely possible to come to the most cursory, dimwitted conclusions imaginable. Every deduction is built from clues you discover, so if you're careless – or if you just fancy making Holmes look like he possesses the analytical prowess of a bap – you can hop to the first conclusion you uncover and leave it at that. There's something pleasing about a feckless Sherlock Holmes bouncing between cases like an idiot pinball, but it also reveals why *Crimes* is so satisfying, it's a proper detective game. You've got to consider how the clues you find slot together. For most of us that's as close as we'll ever come to feeling like a real gumshoe with the added bonus of the game saying 'yes, you were right, aren't you clever?' afterwards.

Crimes and Punishments, then, is the ultimate Sunday evening game. It's the equivalent of sitting down for lukewarm tea and biscuits while your least-racist elderly relative tells you their best anecdote again. Lovely. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Crimes and Punishments gets additional points for not trying too hard. A solid, fruitcake-y 80.

80

FEDORA EX

Ghostcop stars in **MURDERED: SOUL SUSPECT**

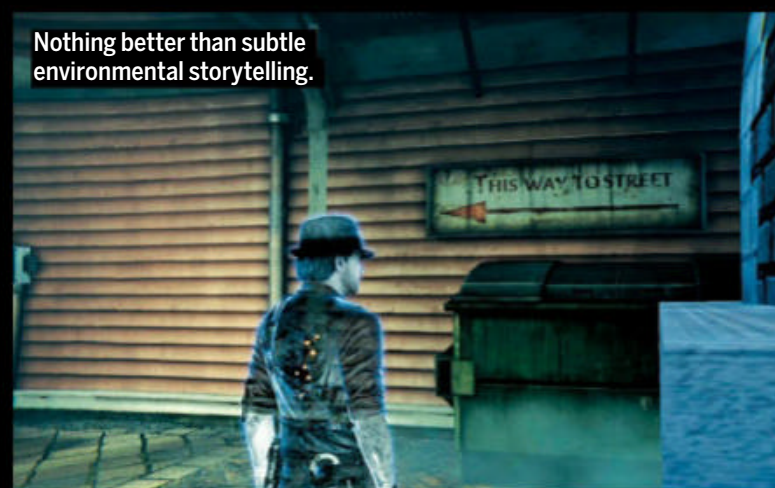
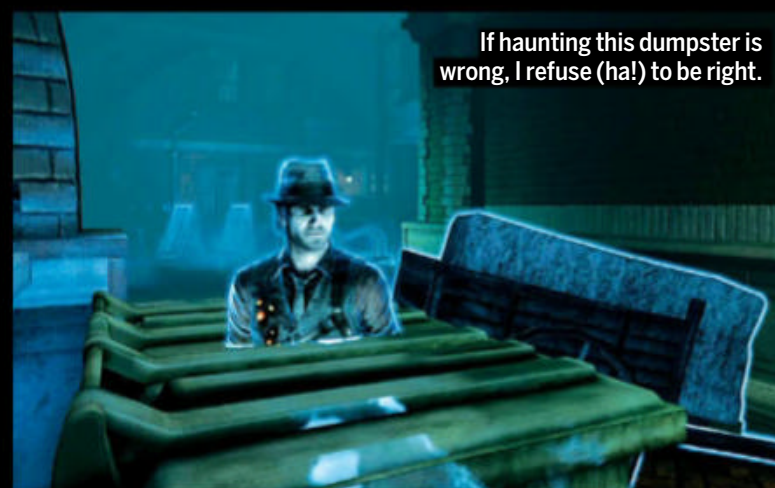
After the honking awfulness of *The Quiet Man*, it seems sensible to revisit Square Enix's second most famous misstep.

It starts well enough. A tidy montage during the intro tells you everything you need to know about spookcop protagonist Ronan O'Connor – he did Bad Crimes when he was younger, but reformed and became a police officer. He dresses like he browses YouTube offering unsolicited critiques on bean roasting videos and his wife is already dead, which saves everyone the trouble of her almost certainly getting fridged later on. *Murdered: Soul Suspect* is a very serious game, then, and it's determined to show us at every opportunity. Despite this, I don't hate it. Salem is the ideal location for a spooky detective story (let's be honest, it was there or New Orleans). And there's something engrossing

about strolling through the afterlife, gathering clues while nobody can see you. But the actual act of interacting with stuff as a ghost is underwhelming. Special haunting rules mean you can only pass through certain objects, which is a restrictive, gamey way of limiting the only fun thing about being dead. And while Ronan can possess people, the choices are light. You're limited to things like looking through their eyes or hearing their thoughts, which are usually brick-obvious hunks of exposition rather than salacious buried secrets. It's a missed opportunity for displaying some much needed humour and humanity.

Murdered: Soul Suspect isn't calamitous though. The lead performances are decent especially given the clammy script and there are some surprisingly creepy moments. ■

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NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
\$20

DEVELOPER
Airtight Games

PUBLISHER
Square Enix



THE ABC MURDERS

If *Crimes and Punishments* is 'cosy', *The ABC Murders* is like sitting beside a wood burning stove wearing a merino wool cardigan, surrounded by pine-scented tea lights. Think hygge with bludgeoning. It's simple but engaging. You'll want to know exactly how each crime was committed, even if you're never shocked by the revelations. And the character profiling doesn't so much say 'consulting detective', as it does 'functioning human being'. But there's still something plump and satisfying about gradually uncovering the truth behind each crime. It's also the uncoolest game I've ever played, which I absolutely mean as a compliment. ■

65



THE SEXY BRUTALE

Most murder mysteries start with a death and leave you to discover the guilty party. *The Sexy Brutale*, by contrast, shows you precisely who's to blame and lets you bend time to prevent the death in the first place. It's a smart concept that feels more cerebral than the temporal hi-jinks we're used to in games. And the cleverest thing here is you always feel you're fighting against the clock despite having infinite time, making the ability to rewind things and try again seem valuable. It's also more stylish than a whale in a Savile Row suit – a game where every room feels like the sort of place Poirot would gather posh people to explain a murder. ■

83



OBSERVER

Rounding off the detective theme is *Observer*, rain-slicked, gloomy, and surprisingly compelling. I expected it to be eight hours of Rutger Hauer grumbling into his trench coat, but there's a decent, surrealist detective game here. I especially love the mix of decaying Polish cityscape and clean, digitised interfaces. It's also a nice departure from trad horror – bleak futuristic tenements replacing gusty haunted houses, and Hauer's creaking performance only adds more to the uneasiness. ■

70

TIME TO STEP OFF THAT TREADMILL

With so many demands from work, home and family, there never seem to be enough hours in the day for you. Why not press pause once in a while, curl up with your favourite magazine and put a little oasis of 'you' in your day.



PRESS PAUSE
ENJOY A MAGAZINE MOMENT

To find out more about Press Pause, visit:
pauseyourday.co.uk

CONTENTS

HARDWARE

GET THE PC YOUR GAMES DESERVE



Yes, even case fans
are RGB now.

GROUP TEST

FANS

Cool your rig with the best PC fans for gaming machines.

By Hayden Dingman

There's a good chance you didn't consider the best PC fans during your last build. Everyone's done it at one point or another. You start assembling a new PC build, you put all the parts in your cart, you look at the total, you cry a little bit, and then you start cutting corners. Case fans are usually the first victim. How different can they be, anyway? Do you really need the best PC fan?

Well no, you don't need it, but the premium fan is probably premium for a reason. You want to strike a balance between noise and airflow, and generally the higher-end fans are

better in that regard. They also tend to last longer thanks to tech like Noctua's 'Self-Stabilising Oil Pressure Bearings', and that longevity is important! Every fan's going to break down eventually, but a more reliable model is the difference between replacing your fans in five years or swapping one or two whining fans out every year. Suddenly getting the best PC fans for your gaming rig doesn't sound too crazy.

Point being it's very easy to neglect case fans and go for the cheapest four-pack of budget blowers, but you do so at your peril. If you want the rest of your components kept cool and efficient, it starts here.



2



HOW WE TEST

There are a lot of case fans out there, so we had to set a few guidelines. First, we limited our tests to 120mm fans. It's not because we hate 140mm, but 120mm is still the 'default' case fan, and it's hard to compare different fan lines when you're also comparing different sizes, so we stuck to 120mm versions.

That in mind, we contacted a number of the most popular case fan manufacturers and had them send over both their best-selling and their personal favourite 120mm models. Then we hacked together a miniature wind tunnel with an anemometer inside, a device that measures airflow and then used a decibel meter to measure relative loudness. We took our decibel readings from five inches, which is closer to these fans than you'd ever be, but helped clarify what are otherwise minute differences in noise level.

We then also maxed out the RPMs on each fan to test a theoretical airflow limit, and the accompanying noise. Chances are you'd never run most of these fans at 100 percent – that's why they're PWM fans! As for RGB lighting? Well, we used our eyes.

Kaze Flex 120 PWM

SCYTHE £10

1 Scythe doesn't make a great first impression, granted. The Kaze Flex 120 PWM arrives in a cheap plastic package, looking more like it came from an auto shop than a modern PC retailer. Side-by-side with Noctua's Redux packaging, or Corsair's weighty boxes, Scythe feels every part the budget fan solution.

And to some extent that's true. Chances are if you were planning to skimp on fans, Scythe would come up in some of your searches. Scythe makes a ton of fans, and some are much better than others in my experience.

The Kaze Flex 120 PWM I tested is one of the company's better models though. At 1200

RPMs the Kaze Flex 120 moved more air in my test rig than some of the competition (Corsair, for instance) did at 1400 or even 1600 RPMs, presumably a result of having eleven blades where most fans have only nine. Lots of air goes hand-in-hand with noise though, and indeed the Kaze Flex 120 PWM is also noisier than the competition at any given speed setting – though since it tops out at 1200 RPMs, the noise is never as bad as models that spin up to higher speeds.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- ✦ Cable is durable
- ✦ Fairly inexpensive
- ✖ Feels inexpensive
- ✖ Relatively noisy

SPECS BEARING TYPE: FLUID DYNAMIC BEARING / RPM RANGE: 300 - 1200 / LISTED CFM: 51.2 / LISTED DBA: 24.9 / RGB: NO / 140MM MODEL NO.: N/A

MF120R A-RGB

COOLER MASTER £16

2 I tested a few (reasonably) budget-friendly RGB options and I'm recommending Cooler Master's MF120R A-RGB kit.

Cooler Master's RGB design is a bit less high-tech than the LL120s, featuring only fan-blade lighting instead of the second ring around the outside. It's still a pretty attractive fan though, fairly bright and with smooth transitions. And while the triple pack kit lists for £70, you can usually find it on sale for much cheaper. Add in the fact that additional fans only cost £16 each, and you're set to save a whole lot of money on your cooling setup. So what's the catch? They're loud. Like, really

loud. Even Cooler Master admits it, listing the MF120R at 31 dBA. In my own tests the MF120R kit was reasonably quiet at 1200 RPM but completely unusable at its maximum 2000 RPM speed.

Granted, the MF120Rs move a lot of air at top speed, tying the Noctua NF-A12x25 for the highest airflow. There's no way you'd want to run them at that speed though. Still, you get a full RGB lighting setup and some pretty strong fans for a fraction of the cost of Corsair's kit.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- ✦ Affordable RGB lighting
- ✦ Lots of airflow potential
- ✖ Louder than the competition
- ✖ Less advanced RGB lighting

SPECS BEARING TYPE: RIFLE BEARING / RPM RANGE: 650 - 2000 / LISTED CFM: 59.0 / LISTED DBA: 31.0 / RGB: YES, EITHER THROUGH MOTHERBOARD OR COOLER MASTER'S CONTROLLER / 140MM MODEL NO.: N/A

NZXT LIMITS THE AER RGB 2'S LEDS TO THE OUTER RING



GROUP TEST

3

Aer RGB 2 120mm

NZXT £27

3 The NZXT Aer RGB 2 won't win any prizes for its performance in my tests. At its top speed of 1500 RPMs the Aer RGB 2 moves a surprising amount of air, but it's also louder than nearly every other fan I tested. Even in my low-speed tests, the Aer RGB 2 proved a hair noisier than the rest.

Look at it, though. It's really a sight to behold, especially in person. Unlike Corsair, NZXT limits the Aer RGB 2's LEDs to the outer ring, casting a slight glow on the spinning fan blades without directly illuminating them – and shining a lot of light outwards into the case. It's a really clean look, objectively as gaudy as any other RGB setup but seeming a bit

more sleek and refined somehow. The Hue 2 controller is also more attractive than any of the other boxes we looked at, meaning you won't mind having to include it alongside the fans in your all-glass case.

Like Corsair, NZXT struggles with price though. A three-pack of 120mm fans plus controller lists for £120, even more than Corsair's LL120 starter kit, and additional fans list for £27, making them among the most expensive in this test.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- ✦ Just really pretty
- ✦ Plenty of accessories included
- ✖ Expensive
- ✖ Louder than average

SPECS BEARING TYPE: FLUID DYNAMIC BEARING / RPM RANGE: 500 - 1500 / LISTED CFM: 52.4 / LISTED DBA: 22.0 / RGB: YES, WITH NZXT HUE 2 / 140MM MODEL NO.: AER RGB 2 140MM

NF-S12B redux-1200

NOCTUA £13

4 If you care at all about case fans, chances are you know Noctua. It's a trusted favourite among many DIY builders, and for good reason. Noctua builds fans that last a long time, move a lot of air, and do it quietly. The problem – until recently, buying Noctua fans meant committing yourself to an ugly khaki-and-mud colour scheme straight out of the 1970s. Noctua was the definition of function-over-form, an engineering wonder that would impress any enthusiast who looked at your PC but disgust everyone else.

Noctua's recent redux line finally rectifies this issue though, recasting time-tested designs in a

modern gray-and-black look that won't detract from the rest of your PC build. And of the two redux models Noctua sent over, the NF-S12B became a quick favourite. It's not as quiet nor as efficient as another blacked out Noctua model, the NF-S12A, but it is cheap. Time was, Noctua fans meant shelling out a lot of money on your build, but the NF-S12B redux balances great performance with a budget-friendly price tag, and looks great in the process.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- ✦ Inexpensive but performs great
- ✦ Less ugly than the old Noctua models
- ✖ No RGB
- ✖ Less powerful than other models

SPECS BEARING TYPE: SELF-STABILISING OIL PRESSURE BEARING / RPM RANGE: 400 - 1200 / LISTED CFM: 59.2 / LISTED DBA: 18.1 / RGB: NO / 140MM MODEL NO.: NF-P14S REDUX - 1200 PWM

4



5



6



NF-A12x25 PWM

NOCTUA **£27**

5 Here's some good ol' Noctua khaki-and-mud for the diehards. The Noctua SF-12B is a fantastic fan, but if you're looking for a top-tier 120mm model that can move a lot of air, the somewhat awkwardly named NF-A12x25 blows away the competition. Of all the fans I tested, this is the model that pumped the most air through my test rig.

Of course, it was able to do that because it maxes out at a zippy 2000 RPMs. And moving that much air comes at a cost, namely noise. Noctua's own stats put the NF-A12x25 in the middle of the pack for noise, but my tests say otherwise – at least, at top speed. Spinning along at its full

2000 RPM glory the NF-A12x25 was the second-loudest fan I tested, surpassed only by another 2000 RPM Cooler Master fan. But the NF-A12x25 was also the quietest fan I tested when running at lower RPMs. My numbers have it putting out less noise at 1200 RPMs than some fans running even 300 RPMs slower. Since those speeds are more likely to come up in day-to-day use, that makes the NF-A12x25 an excellent choice for your gaming PC.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- ⊕ Highest airflow of any fan we tested
- ⊕ Lots of accessories included
- ⊖ Old Noctua colour scheme
- ⊖ Expensive for a fan with no LEDs

SPECS BEARING TYPE: SELF-STABILISING OIL PRESSURE BEARING – SECOND GENERATION / **RPM RANGE:** 450-2000 / **LISTED CFM:** 60.1 / **LISTED DBA:** 22.6 / **RGB:** NO / **140MM MODEL NO.:** NF-A14 PWM

LL120 RGB

CORSAIR **£20**

6 If you're chasing that cyberpunk aesthetic then Corsair's LL120 Pro RGB fans are the best you can buy. The LL120s are packed full of RGB LEDs. Each has a complement of LEDs shining out from the rotor, diffusing light down the length of the blades. Then there's a separate ring of light embedded around the housing's outer edge. As a result the LL120s are the brightest and showiest fans I tested, and a perfect fit for any RGB addict.

They're not just for show, though. The LL120s are also pretty solid fans, lighting or no. At mid-range speeds they tend to be slightly louder than the competition, but at load they're

quieter than just about any non-Noctua fan I tested – and that's only because most of the Noctua fans top out at 1200 RPM, versus 1500 RPM for the LL120. The problem? They're expensive. Incredibly expensive.

To use LL120s you need to commit to purchasing a three-pack of fans with an included Corsair Lighting Node Pro, a package that lists for £83. Additional fans will run you £20 each. That's a chunk of cash, even if the results are stellar.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- ⊕ Top-tier RGB lighting
- ⊕ Surprisingly quiet at full-speed
- ⊖ Expensive
- ⊖ Slightly louder than the competition

SPECS BEARING TYPE: HYDRAULIC BEARING / **RPM RANGE:** 600-1500 / **LISTED CFM:** 43.3 / **LISTED DBA:** 24.8 / **RGB:** YES, WITH CORSAIR LIGHTING NODE PRO / **140MM MODEL NO.:** LL140 RGB

YOUR NEXT PC

BUYER'S GUIDE

Build the best PC for your budget



KEY

Budget build

PC gaming is for everyone. Pick the parts you want to build a new, well-rounded PC for a good price.

Mid-range build

You want to run every new game at 1080p 60fps. This recommended build will see you through.

Advanced build

You're looking for the best PC on the market and superior components. But you still want to spend smart.

BUDGET BUILD

Enjoy 1080p gaming without breaking the bank



TOTAL
£923

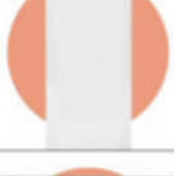
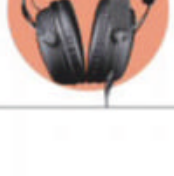
MOTHERBOARD		B360M-DS3H Gigabyte £70 It lacks overclocking options, but the new B360 chipset is far cheaper than the Z370 and is perfect for this budget build.
PROCESSOR		Core i3-8100 Intel £118 A great processor for out-of-the-box gaming performance. Opt for the AMD Ryzen 1300X if you'd like to overclock.
GRAPHICS CARD		GeForce GTX 1060 Windforce OC 3GB Gigabyte £188 Amidst fluctuating GPU prices, Gigabyte's compact 1060 model offers the best value.
COOLER		Hyper 212 Evo CoolerMaster £25 Even a budget build can benefit from a good CPU cooler, letting you enjoy a quieter, cooler system.
MEMORY		Vengeance LPX 8GB (2x4GB) @2400MHz Corsair £50 DDR4 prices are still high, however this Corsair pair is a good value option.
POWER SUPPLY		CX-M Series CX550M Corsair £56 A UK price spike in our previous EVGA 500W pick opens the door for this quiet Corsair option.
SSD		MX500 250GB Crucial £37 Crucial's SSD range is fantastic value and offers good performance, too. A 250GB drive can hold your OS and essential programs.
HDD		WD Blue 1TB 7200RPM Western Digital £38 One terabyte of old-fashioned hard storage is the perfect home for all of your media, backups and storage-hungry games.
CASE		Neos Bitfenix £34 The Neos provides decent airflow, good support for 3.5-inch hard drives, and a fairly painless build experience.
DISPLAY		G2460PF AOC £199 This is the cheapest 144Hz gaming monitor you can buy, yet it still offers decent image quality, great performance and Freesync.
KEYBOARD		K55 Corsair £48 This keyboard may lack mechanical keyswitches but it offers decent typing, plus it has RGB and extra gaming keys.
MOUSE		Rival 110 SteelSeries £25 A great sensor, simple design and impressively low price make this a great entry-level gaming mouse.
HEADSET		Cloud Stinger HyperX £35 We love the HyperX Cloud, but at £70 it's too much for an entry-level system. The Cloud Stinger is the next best thing.

MID-RANGE BUILD

Our recommended build for playing the latest games



TOTAL
£1,635

MOTHERBOARD		Z370 Tomahawk MSI £155 This is a nice-looking bit of kit at a good price. Couple that with two M.2 slots, and it's the perfect place to house that Core i5.
PROCESSOR		Core i5-8600K Intel £257 Say goodbye to our reliable workhorse, the i5-8400. This month we're upgrading to an unlocked K-model CPU.
GRAPHICS CARD		GeForce RTX 2060 Twin Fan Zotac £329 Zotac's Twin Fan model replaces our Founder's Edition RTX 2060, offering formidable cooling for the price.
COOLER		Hydro Series H55 Quiet Edition Corsair £55 Scarcity of our previous pick in the US sees a nice quiet Corsair cooler introduced this month.
MEMORY		Vengeance LPX 16GB (2x8GB) @2666 Corsair £94 16GB is the minimum amount of RAM we'd recommend for a system of this calibre.
POWER SUPPLY		RMx 650W Corsair £93 There's nothing like having a quality power supply. Get a decent cable kit for this one and you can easily spice up your rig.
SSD		MX500 250GB Crucial £37 This is still our SSD of choice. We've kept the capacity the same as our cheaper build, but upgrading to 500GB would be ideal.
HDD		WD Blue 1TB 7200RPM Western Digital £38 SSDs are great, but they're still far from cheap. This 1TB HDD will hold as many games as you will need.
CASE		Eclipse P400S TG Phanteks £80 The clean lines, intuitive build features and fantastic price cements the Eclipse as our mid-range case of choice.
DISPLAY		AGON AG251FZ AOC £290 Not only does this 1080p monitor have a lightning-fast 240Hz refresh rate but it produces decent image quality, too.
KEYBOARD		MasterKeys Pro L CoolerMaster £75 This is one of the cheapest mechanical keyboards, yet it looks and feels great. It only has single-colour backlighting, though.
MOUSE		AW958 Elite Alienware £62 Suitable for any grip thanks to its add-ons, and there's just something about those massive metallic buttons.
HEADSET		HyperX Cloud Kingston £70 Despite the budget price, we recommend this headset. There's simply nothing better for the money.

ADVANCED BUILD

Go above and beyond with a PC powerful enough to end worlds



TOTAL
£3,523

MOTHERBOARD



Strix X470-F Gaming

Asus **£181**

Get the most from the new AMD Ryzen 2700X with this matching X470 motherboard that's packed with features.

PROCESSOR



Ryzen 7 2700X

AMD **£300**

Easy to overclock and with huge performance out of the box, AMD's new flagship CPU is the one to go for.

GRAPHICS CARD

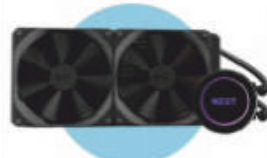


GeForce RTX 2080Ti Black Edition

EVGA **£1,072**

EVGA's custom design is considerably cheaper than Nvidia's reference card, and with great cooling.

COOLER



Kraken X62

NZXT **£140**

The Kraken is the culmination of three of our favourite things: an infinity mirror, a 280mm radiator and slick braided cooling.

MEMORY



Vengeance LED RGB 32GB @3200

Corsair **£264**

Ryzen is the one processor that does benefit hugely from higher-frequency memory. This kit is perfect for any would-be video expert.

POWER SUPPLY



HX750i 80 Plus Platinum

Corsair **£138**

Modular, custom cable kits, and a platinum efficiency rating. What's not to love about this Corsair PSU? Nothing, that's what.

SSD



970 Evo 500GB M.2 PCIe SSD

Samsung **£119**

Samsung's newest NVMe SSDs push performance to new heights and cost the same as the previous 960 range.

HDD



WD Blue 4TB

Western Digital **£99**

With a large boot SSD, there's little need for a large, cheap SSD. Instead we've opted for a huge 4TB hard drive for all your bulk data.

CASE



Enthoo Evolv ATX TG

Phanteks **£135**

The 5mm thick aluminium panels resonate with svelte professionalism, and the interior makes building inside this a dream.

DISPLAY



XB271HU

Acer **£640**

Our previous choice, the AOC AG271QG, has shot up in price. This Acer is now the best value 165Hz IPS gaming display.

KEYBOARD



K70 LUX RGB

Corsair **£115**

Even when money is no object it's hard to argue against Corsair's latest K70. A no-fuss, solid piece of aluminium craftsmanship.

MOUSE



Mamba Elite

Razer **£90**

A beautiful design, comfortable shape and outstanding performance make this a brilliant high-end gaming mouse.

HEADSET



ATH-AG1X

Audio-technica **£230**

What's life without a nice set of cans? The ATH-AG1X set is the pinnacle of headphones, and it's super comfy to boot.

EXTRA+LIFE

CONTINUED ADVENTURES IN GAMING

You can practically smell the pine needles through the pages.



“You can do a whole lot worse than a break to this facsimile of Sweden”

The ideal getaway can be found in **THE ELDER SCROLLS V: SKYRIM**.

No offence to Sweden (lovely country; fantastic meatballs), but the place is pricey. I once spent a week there on someone else's dollar, and even then wound up wincing every time I ordered some smörgås or toast Skagen, let alone an extortionately taxed pint. In the penniless post-Christmas slump, it's fairly safe to say that I won't be jetting off on a Scandi vacation. Or any other type of vacation, to be honest. Thankfully, I have a solution – *Skyrim*, aka gaming's greatest holiday resort. I mean, the cart ride to the executioner's block is arguably a far more promising start to a trip than the scrum of boarding a budget flight.

EMMA DAVIES



THIS MONTH
Combed Tamriel in search of a sunlounger.

ALSO PLAYED
The Room Three

Once you're free to go your own way, this expansive swathe of north Tamriel has all you might need to mentally escape the grey commuter trudge of the rain-streaked British winter. A rural waterside retreat? Stop for a few days in Falkreath. A spot of sightseeing? Markarth has some delightful Dwemer ruins. Peaceful open space filled with lakes, forests and fresh air? Check, check

and check – just look around you. The whole place is so incredibly eye-soothing that it's damn near impossible not to be whisked off in the most relaxing way. Well, so long as you ignore the feral wildlife, gangs of bandits and occasional mythical creature out for blood (yours, preferably). Hey, nobody said it couldn't be an adventure holiday, if that's your thing.

Although, if I'm honest, for me *Skyrim: Holiday Edition* is about anything *but* the adventure. In the

FOR ME SKYRIM: HOLIDAY EDITION IS ABOUT ANYTHING BUT THE ADVENTURE



same way that I wouldn't start spoiling for a scrap on Malia's main drag, I'm all about steering as far clear of combat as possible. Off go the quest markers, away go the war axes and off the beaten track I venture, trekking in a manner that I absolutely would never be bothered to do on a trip I'd shelled out actual gold for.

SPENDING MONEY

Speaking of gold, I like to treat myself, too. When playing normally, I'm an utter skinflint. Why should I pay to rent a room when away from home? I can just stand around and wait for a few hours, no biggie. Hot meals? I've got a chunk of rabbit leg in my pocket, anything else is just frivolity. Stopping to chat? Can't you see I've got errands to run?! But when I want to escape? Only the finest inns and stews for this Bosmer. Letting loose with a bit of extra time and money is exactly what holidays are about.

If the weekday grind is getting you down, you can do a whole lot worse than a mini-break to this virtual facsimile of Sweden – at a cost infinitely lower than the real thing. It's a spot of comfort gaming at its absolute finest. So, who's boarding the next direct hay wagon to Tamriel? A word of warning, though – make sure you don't show anybody your passport. One glimpse of the Dovahkiin name and your chances of a peaceful break are as unlikely as a cheap pint in Scandinavia. ■



“I’m only angry because I care”

Engaging in a gardening cold war in **TREE.BONSAI**.

PHILIPPA WARR



THIS MONTH
Took umbrage at digital nature.

ALSO PLAYED
Subnautica: Below Zero

So far I have accidentally lopped off half my bonsai tree, accidentally landed myself with a horrible pot for my bonsai tree, and accidentally transformed it into a completely different bonsai tree after spending nearly an in-game decade getting the first one to grow in pleasing directions. I'd say this is approximately 25 percent *Tree.Bonsai's* fault and about 75 percent my fault.

Looking at it from the outside, you'd think *Tree.Bonsai* is a relaxing game. A slow progression through seasons as you choose which branches of a plum tree to prune and which to encourage as you shape your plant. From the inside it is a battle of wills. On the one hand there is you, the benevolent gardener who only wants to relax in the company of nature. On the other is a tree that seems to be hellbent on rebellion.

I've just gotten round to my third cycle of the Chinese Zodiac and I seem to be spending the Year of the Rat cutting unsightly branches off my

tree, applying nutrient solution to the branch which is growing correctly, and then watching as the tree almost immediately regrows another errant branch to spite me. It's like when you babysit a toddler and they hold eye contact as they do the exact thing you told them not to do and then deny they're doing it AS YOU WATCH THEM DOING IT.

I should point out that I'm only angry because I care. I want this tree to be spectacular. I want it to be the subject of beautiful screenshots. I want it to twist about eight degrees more in a clockwise direction. And I will hack off every last twig which fails to bow to my will.

TRIMMING AND PRUNING

Tree.Bonsai is in early access while the developer tinkers with the project in response to player suggestions. The suggestions are generally things like minor changes to control schemes, requests for different types of tree and so on, all of which make *Tree.Bonsai* feel like a bonsai itself, with GuoJun Pan gently shaping the game. It's a lovely parallel which OH FOR THE LOVE OF – why is this tree branch now growing straight down? Some bonsai trees are hundreds of years old. How does anyone stand them for that long? They are the cold war of gardening. They are the – AND NOW WHAT? The good branch has fallen off and the downward branch has remained. I hate this tree. ■



“All I need is a rocket launcher and a shovel, and I’m good to go”

Trying to chase the past in **TEAM FORTRESS 2**.

I’ve broken back into old habits. One particularly old habit, to be exact. Going into the new year, it’s not been *Overwatch* rounds that fill the time between shifts. I’m not chasing my usual high scores in *Nuclear Throne* or sailing through *No Man’s Sky*’s stars. I’m not proud, but for the last two months, my go to game has been *Team Fortress 2*.

I’m knee deep in the hats. Lets Plays and live commentaries dominate my YouTube feed, and I’ve cracked open the old Source mapping tools for the first time in years. It’s time to party like it’s 2009 – I’m going to find the fortress time forgot.

That first night begins with the basics. A lot has changed in the half-decade since I played this game regularly. These days, you can check off some boxes – maps, game modes, casual or ranked – and jump straight into a matchmade game. But that’s not the game I remember. Diving into the murky depths of the server browser is as much a skill as nailing the perfect rocket jump.

We start on a classic. It’s 32-player 2fort, and it’s madness. Balconies bristle with the constant beeping of

▶ **NATALIE CLAYTON**



THIS MONTH
Shamelessly wallowing in nostalgia.

ALSO PLAYED
Apex Legends, *Jet Set Radio*

sentry guns. It’s a war of attrition, a Sisyphean struggle to move a briefcase from one side of a river to the other. It’s *Team Fortress 2* at its purest, but it’s too much right now.

Or perhaps it’s not enough, because the next few games don’t just crank things up to 11 – they tear the knob right off and blast it into space. Some servers run a little thing called ‘x10’, which multiplies weapon stats by 10. This one runs ‘x100’, and it shows. Soldiers fly across the map, shooting a firework display of rockets. Demomen sneeze a thousand grenades. Heavies can kill with a look... after a five-minute minigun windup. But then, I find it. Nestled in

A LOT HAS CHANGED IN THE HALF-DECADE SINCE I PLAYED THIS GAME REGULARLY

the game browser, simply titled “Yet another TF2 server”, I find nirvana. It’s the regular server, the digital chill-out spot that made *Team Fortress 2* phenomenal. It’s Hightower. It’s deathmatch, baby!

This is the time machine. Players come and go, but there’s a playful air. A new player is ecstatic after killing me, his murder an act of uprising against the “pay-to-players” (my purchase of *The Orange Box* apparently a status symbol).

SENSE OF BELONGING

It’s not all roses – teen voices shout homophobic slurs through cheap microphones in a bit of nostalgia that’s a little less welcome.

Thankfully, they don’t hang around long, but it sours the mood a little.

Otherwise, this is what I was looking for. It’s why every night this month has been spent in this server, or servers like it – the sense of belonging that comes from a digital playground without expectations.

I came to *Team Fortress 2* this year because I began to bounce hard off games like *Overwatch*. Games that expect you to be on all the time. Right now, I don’t need to be on. All I need is a rocket launcher and a shovel, and I’m good to go. ■

“In a hut I meet a green, sick-looking hedgehog called Chronic”

BROKEN REALITY transports you to a wild vaporwave world.

I've never played a videogame quite like *Broken Reality*. Set in a virtual world that reminds me of the primitive 3D chat rooms I used to frequent in the early 2000s, with a slathering of vaporwave, it's hard to pin down exactly what it is. It has puzzles, quests, dialogue, exploration... but, really, it's its own thing. One of those games that's impossible to pigeonhole – and I'm immediately smitten by its surreal, subversive spirit.

If you're a fan of the vaporwave aesthetic, you'll feel right at home here. This is a world of jagged polygons, chequerboard floors, Roman columns, Win95 error messages, and lots of hot pink and teal. But while vaporwave is often clumsily appropriated by people who don't really understand it, it's clear the people behind *Broken Reality* do. And the result is one of the most dazzling, bizarre, colourful videogame worlds I've ever explored.

As I amble around this confusing, overwhelming place, I see mannequin-like avatars everywhere, chatting to each other. There are

ANDY KELLY



THIS MONTH
Explored a bizarre world,
met a stoned hedgehog.

ALSO PLAYED
Resident Evil 2

pop-up ads too, and I can use my Liker – a thumb that floats in front of me like a Doom shotgun – to like them, earning likes in return. This is the game's primary currency, and almost everything you do sends your likes meter ticking up. *Broken Reality* is pretty tongue in cheek.

On a beach I stumble into a hut and meet a green, sick-looking hedgehog called Chronic. “Gotta take it slow,” he says when I poke him with my thumb. Later I meet a wise old man who tells me that if I locate and rebuild his lost katana, he'll teach me the art of protecting this world from spam. This is one of the game's

many side quests, which gives it a lightweight RPG feel.

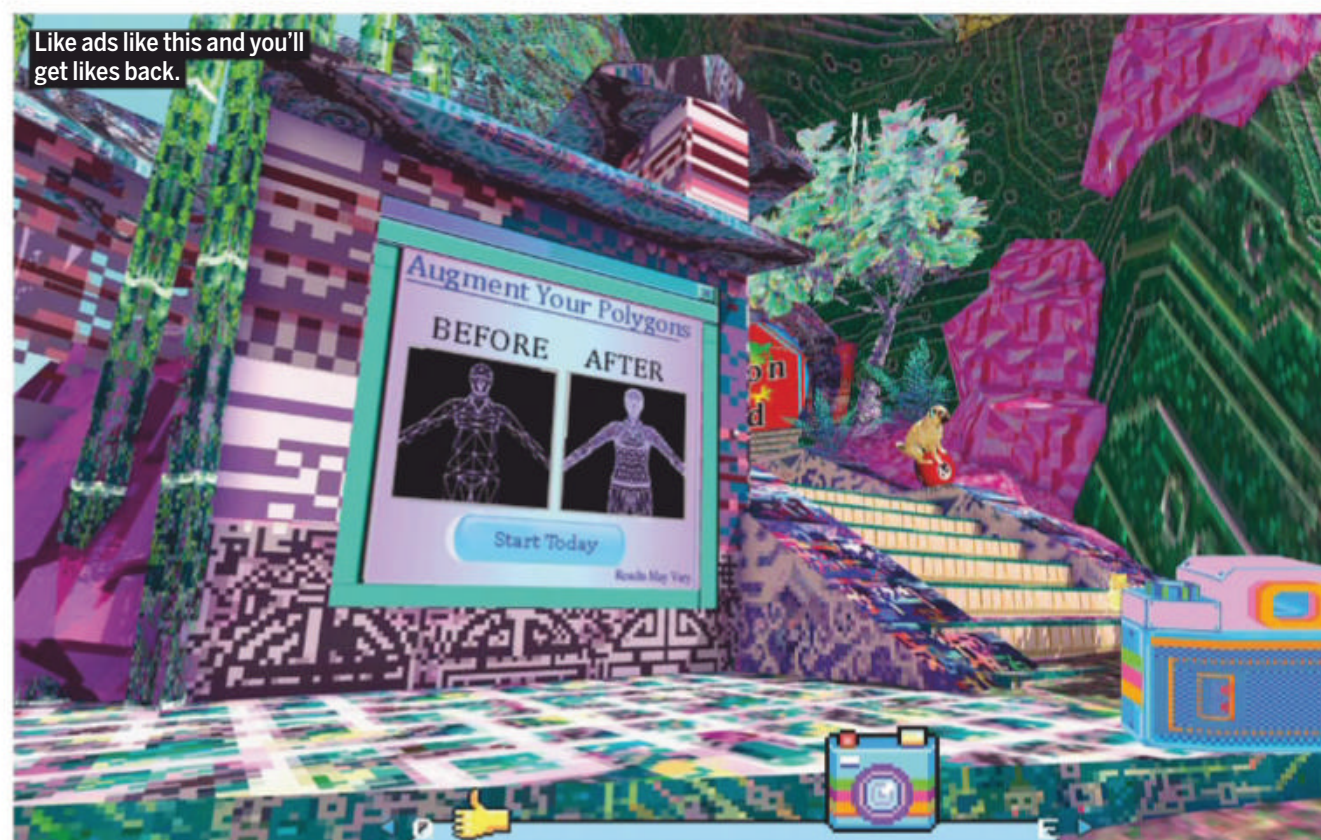
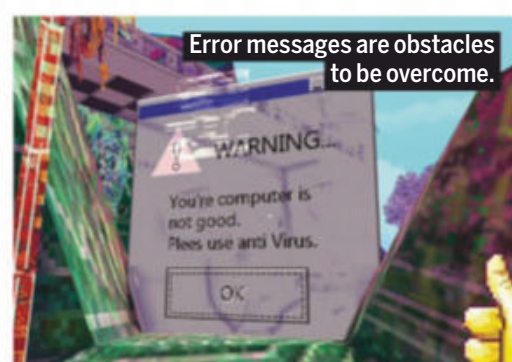
There's some cool spatial puzzling in here too. I hit a switch and activate a staircase that'll let me bypass a dead end, but it resets far too quickly. Then I discover a new tool called a Bookmarker that lets me set teleport points wherever I like, and the solution to the puzzle becomes clear.

A CASE OF THE VAPOURS

I also find a camera on my travels, which lets me snap photos of points of interest to earn yet more likes. A bodybuilder flexing on a beach asks me to take a photo of him, and he returns the favour with a can of digital tea (no, I don't know either) and a shower of likes. It's a fun system, and the more likes I get, the higher my status, which lets me access new parts of the world, which I can see stretching into a pink sky.

I can't wait to explore more of *Broken Reality*'s weird, wonderful world. I love the focus on discovery over violence, which the dev has actually highlighted as a selling point. It's cool to interact with a game in more interesting ways than firing a gun – especially one as visually striking as this. ■

“GOTTA TAKE IT SLOW,” HE SAYS WHEN I POKE HIM WITH MY THUMB







DOTA AUTO CHESS

The joyful deck-based *Dota 2* game. *By Philippa Warr*

Believe it or not, learning *Dota 2* is easy nowadays. I don't mean easy in the sense that it is

straightforward or comprehensible or painless. I mean easy in the sense that it is slightly less angry at you for wanting to know what's going on. I mean easy in the sense that people like me will tell you that you've never had it so good. We had to walk two miles in the Frostivus snow to find a match, and whittle our own Force Staff by hand and no one had even heard of Purge and his useful video tutorials.

Dota Auto Chess – a spectacularly popular custom game mode by Drodo Studio – is a return to that initial bafflement. “You can pick dota heros as your chesses,” says the blurb, “and they will automatically fight for you on a 8*8 chessboard.”

Now, I have 2,000+ hours of *Dota* on my account. I beat my mum at chess when I was in a hospital bed, stuffed with morphine after a life-saving operation. Neither of these skillsets has proven particularly useful in *Dota Auto Chess*.

The broad idea behind *Dota Auto Chess* is closer to deck-building games than to either chess or *Dota*. The basic pattern of each round is: earn money, choose whether to spend that money on heroes, position those heroes on the board, then let a fight against the heroes of a randomly chosen opponent (from the seven others you're grouped with) auto-resolve. If you win, you get a bit more gold and maintain your health bar. If you lose, you'll take a bit of damage. A match lasts as many rounds as it takes for only one player to be left standing and you can keep an eye on how everyone's doing via a leaderboard on the right hand side of the screen.

Because nothing related to *Dota* is ever simple, there are a lot of other variables to keep track of along the way. Managing your gold is vital – you want to balance investing in heroes and getting gold through fighting, with keeping some in your pocket to earn interest, spending to level up your donkey (and thus increase the number of heroes – referred to as “chesses” – which you can have on the board), and re-rolling the hero selection.

STATS BOOST

Each hero is listed with a species and class. If you have multiple heroes from that species or class on the board you can get boosts. The orc species combo gets you higher



IF YOU BEAT THEM THEY CAN DROP LITTLE TREASURE CHESTS CONTAINING ITEMS

maximum HP for each orc, the mage class combo reduces enemy magic resistance.

As well as that interplay there's a spatial element. Do you bunch your heroes up or spread them out? Do you try to protect a vulnerable unit or shove them to the front as a meat shield? How can you keep important combos in play by keeping the relevant units alive? That's one part which felt like it was drawing on my actual *Dota* knowledge.

Another part which taps into that knowledge is the item system. Some rounds have you facing off against non-player units – the neutral creeps from *Dota*'s jungles. If you beat them they can drop little treasure chests containing items which the donkey can fetch and put in its little

RANK AMATEUR

So you're “Pawn 9”. What does that really mean?



PAWN

Pawn is low. Pawn 1 is the lowest of the low.



KNIGHT

You are better than a beetle crushed under a chessboard.



BISHOP

Now you're getting somewhere.



ROOK

You might even be considered “good” at this point!



KING

Are you okay? How do you have this much free time?



QUEEN

Congrats and all. But we're here to stage an intervention.

backpack. You can then ask the donkey to deliver the items to a specific unit, thus bestowing its benefits to that hero. Essentially it's the courier function the donkey traditionally fulfils in *Dota 2*. Knowing the types of items which benefit particular heroes in the main game will give you a headstart here. If you don't know *Dota* you might not realise you need to deliver the items to specific heroes at all instead of just collecting them in your pack.

Then there's the merge-three minigame. Plonking down three identical heroes of the same level (with one or two class exceptions) will merge them into a single, more powerful hero. This has knock-on effects when it comes to which heroes you buy, when you should place them on the board, and how it raises or reduces the number of units on the board.

When I booted the game up for the first time it wasn't even clear where I was, or how I was supposed to chess. The game tips disappeared offscreen before I'd read the first word and the camera was pointing at a rival's board, meaning I couldn't see the result of any of my actions. The resulting panic is how I learned that the boards of each of the eight players are presented as physical islands in a 3x3 grid. Panning around you can check in on other players or enjoy the fact that the middle board is missing, replaced by a small version of the *Dota* map.

Finding my island is how I discovered I needed to interact with my chesses by selecting a donkey and having the donkey do the chess on my behalf. If you're familiar with *Dota*, moving your donkey around is probably also when you'll realise it's not actually a donkey. Instead it

seems to be the hero Io (as per the lore – a multidimensional wisp billed as a Fundamental of the universe) wearing a donkey costume. You can tell it's Io because it's making Io's Ibiza chillout beeping and blooping noises and trailing particle effects across the chessboard.

CHOICES TO MAKE

The existential question of "when is a digital donkey not a digital donkey" is irrelevant to play, but it's fun to notice how pieces of the main game are repurposed in these custom modes. Again, it's a way that *Dota Auto Chess* feels true to an older form of *Dota* – the *Defence of the Ancients* which emerged from the *Warcraft III* fan-made map cauldron, and whose quirks are often the result of units being turned to a new purpose.

I'm absolutely loving it. In each phase there are a manageable number of choices to make. Making a sub-optimal choice doesn't feel like a total disaster. It taps into the little jolts of pleasure casual games are good at – the satisfaction of merging heroes, auto-fought battles with over-the-top effects and the chance to win, a little leaderboard...

Another joy is the lack of toxicity and the lack of pressure. It probably says a lot about the confusing interface that for ages I had no sense of whether the lack of repulsive messages was because the game elicits less rage or whether there's just no all chat function.

A message in Russian during my fourth match points to the former. But, with or without chat, I often feel massive pressure in PvP games. I don't want to embarrass myself. I don't want to lose.

I particularly don't want to be the worst on any leaderboard.

But here, I'm playing a weird once-removed version of PvP. My squad of heroes is mostly pitted against the heroes of a human opponent, but the other person isn't spectating that match. They're looking at a different chess board, watching their heroes take on a randomly chosen selection of someone else's heroes. It might end up being mine, but it might not. Me winning or losing doesn't affect them directly. We're just having our armies and choices calibrated and recalibrated against each other. And it's this distinction which takes the sting out of the competition without damping the pleasure of winning.

But what would a free-to-play game within a free-to-play game be without cosmetic microtransactions?



ESSENTIALLY IT'S THE COURIER FUNCTION THE DONKEY TRADITIONALLY FULFILLS IN DOTA 2

An excellent question, dear reader. Well, you can earn or buy candy – the premium currency and spend it on spins of a slot machine. The rewards from spinning this machine are different couriers. So it's not pay-to-win, just a different look for your non-chess piece character.

And it's not pushy either – a real contrast to the *Dota* client it sits within. While logging in to *Dota 2* to access the custom game section, Valve immediately invited me to spend £28 on an outfit for a character I don't even play. After I refused, it reminded me I can spend £2 to open a seasonal treasure chest.

At some point I fully expect the Steam store will stop trading in cash and start accepting the souls of children in exchange for digital hats. But I digress.

SKILL CEILING

The above should give you a sense of both the low barrier for entry ("low" being a relative term and entirely skewed by *Dota*'s base level of nonsense) and the ridiculously high skill ceiling of *Dota Auto Chess*. It manages to be similar to and the polar opposite of *Artifact*'s considered design and overwhelming complexity.

It's a joyful, weird, opaque project – a hodgepodge of casual mobile gaming compulsion and PC gaming at its most bloody-mindedly hardcore – spitting personality and spell effects from every angle. ■

ANATOMY OF DAC A basic guide to what's on screen



1. Click this to see the heroes currently for sale
2. The 8x8 playspace
3. Heroes with green HP bars are yours.
4. These are the actions you can perform.
5. This is you – the donkey courier
6. Items awaiting delivery to heroes
7. How many of your maximum piece limit are in play
8. Gold in hand
9. The leaderboard for the match



At the top you can see a cosmetic courier upgrade.



Shadow Fiend is stronger without other demons on the board.



Levelled up heroes are bigger and wear fancier clothes.



IMPROVE YOUR FPS AIM

Keep whiffing your shots? Here's how to aim more accurately. *By Sam Horti*

NEED TO KNOW

DIFFICULTY
Hard

TIME
An ongoing process...

VITAL LINKS

The best gaming mouse:
bit.ly/pcgmouse

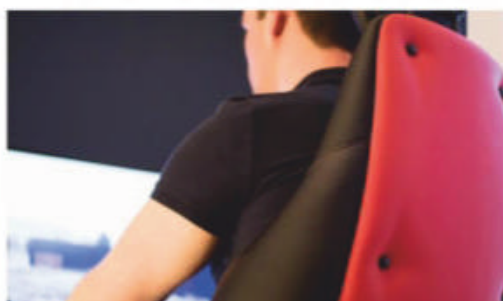
All you need to know about sensitivity:
bit.ly/pcgdpi

Aim Lab, a free aim training tool:
bit.ly/aimlab



GET THE RIGHT GEAR

1 Good aim doesn't require the latest hardware, but it helps to have at least a decent mouse and mousepad. Don't break the bank, you can get a solid mouse for less than £50 (find the best ones at bit.ly/pcgmouse), and a mousepad for £10.



SIT COMFORTABLY

2 To aim properly you'll need to be relaxed, and have space to move both your arm and wrist freely. Sit with a straight back and ensure your elbow is roughly level with your mouse and mousepad, or a little bit higher.



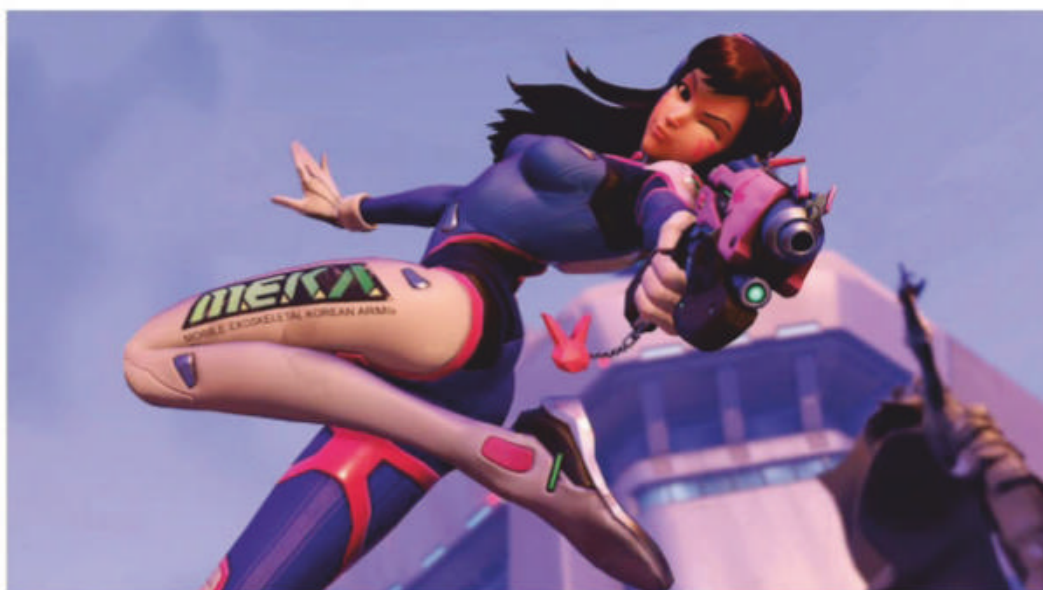
IDENTIFY YOUR WEAKNESSES

3 You need to know where to focus your efforts. Record some gameplay (instructions at bit.ly/pcgreorder) and watch it to identify what you're doing wrong. Overshooting your targets? Panicking under pressure? It's important to know.



SET OUT A PLAN

4 Based on those weaknesses, create a rough plan for how to improve. The steps below will help everyone, but you can tailor them to your needs. If you struggle with aiming while jumping, for example, concentrate on practising that.

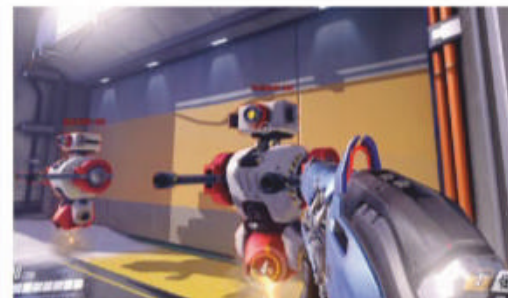
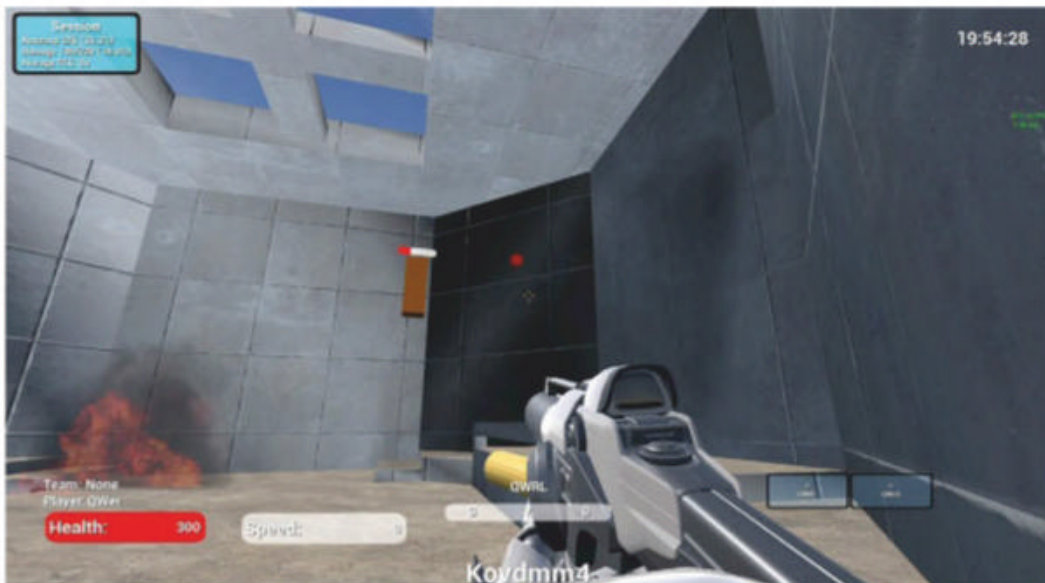


STICK TO A SENSITIVITY

5 You want to be able to do a 180-degree turn with a full slide across your mousepad. Adjust sensitivity in-game or using your mouse manufacturer's software. Start low and work your way up until you're comfortable.

USE AN AIM TRAINER

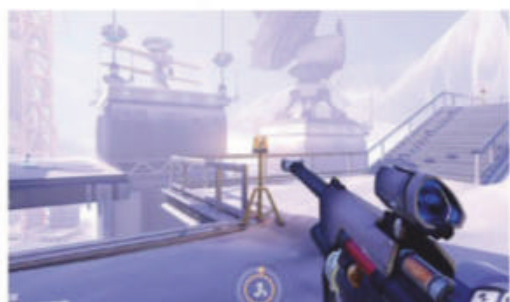
6 Aim trainers won't replicate in-game practice, but they're good for general mouse control. There are loads on Steam – Kovaak's FPS Aim Trainer is good and inexpensive, while Aim Labs' one is a free option.



PLAY YOUR FAVOURITE FPS

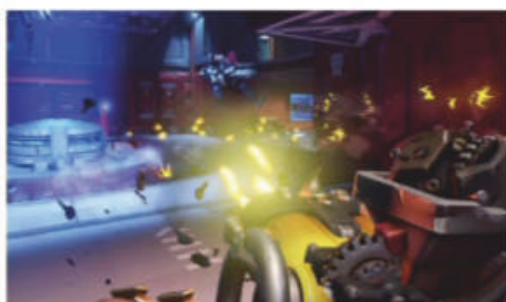
7 Alongside an aim trainer, you'll want to practice in-game. If your FPS of choice has a practice range, go there, but if not, set up a custom game with bots that won't shoot you. Practice moving from target to target and blasting heads.

SHOOT TO KILL *Extra tips to up your body count*



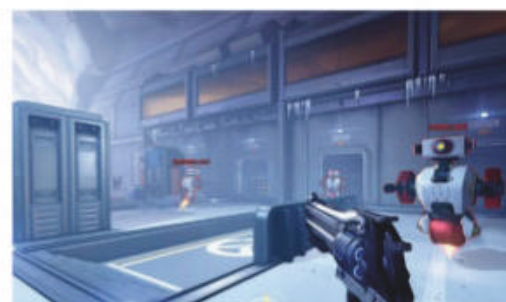
MASTER STRAFING

8 For a more stable aim, practice aiming at a stationary object while you strafe. Try it at different distances – it might seem dull, but it will build up the muscle memory that will help you win firefights in clutch situations.



TRACK MOVING OBJECTS

9 Practice keeping your cursor over a moving enemy, clicking steadily. Try it both when you're standing still and when you're strafing, jumping and crouching to help simulate the conditions of a competitive match.



TRY OUT FLICK SHOTS

10 Quick flick shots are great ways to land a kill, and they're easy to practice. Simply aim away from an object and then, in one movement, try to snap to it and fire, before resetting back to your start position and trying again.



REVIEW YOUR PROGRESS

11 Once you feel like you're getting more accurate, record some gameplay against real enemies. See if your weaknesses have improved, and take note of any new habits you've formed. Play back footage at half-speed for an in-depth look.



KEEP AT IT!

12 Rinse and repeat. Improving your aim is an ongoing process that requires time and patience, but if you keep following these steps, play regularly and track your progress, you'll be landing more headshots in no time at all.



DISHONORED II: THE JUDGE OF KARNACA

PART II

The judgemental playthrough of Arkane Studios' revenge fantasy continues.

By Rick Lane

THE RULES

1 Judge the actions of every NPC in *Dishonored II* using clues from the environment and game mechanics.

2 Only kill NPCs with clear evidence of wrongdoing. "Innocent" lives must be spared.

3 High Chaos must be avoided if possible.

We're off to the Clockwork Mansion today to put a spanner in the works of inventor and philosopher Kirin Jindosh, as well as rescuing Anton Sokolov, currently in Jindosh's clutches. The good doctor Hypatia, who I spared in my visit to Addermire, describes Jindosh as having "the empathy of a Mantis", so I'm already leaning toward a permanent solution to this particularly human enigma.

I'm less certain about how to approach the dozens of other guards, gangsters and civilians I'll encounter en-route. I left Addermire having killed a total of 36 people. Thanks to the Heart telling me their innermost secrets, I'm confident they thoroughly deserved it, but it's also left me with a High Chaos rating. This basically points you towards the bad ending, although the game doesn't explicitly say this. I'm supposed to be cleaning up Karnaca, not smearing the blood around to make a bigger mess, so ideally I need to rein my murder in a little to avoid dooming the city.

Naturally, the moment I arrive at Karnaca's Aventa District, the Heart provides me with a nightmare judgement. I point it at a civilian hanging around outside a wine shop, and it says, "He knew hagfish was not a fit food for the child. All those little bones. But he didn't care."

Jeeeebus Eight Cripes, everything about this is horrible. The story is horrible. The phrasing is horrible, disturbingly vivid but also just vague enough to put doubt in my mind. The man is clearly horrible, but is he horrible enough? Remember, I need to try to minimise my footprint. In the end, it's the specificity of the words "All those little bones" that forces my hand. I possess him, walk him toward a secluded area and put a dart in his ear. All those little bones.

I think this encounter must have thrown my concentration, because almost immediately afterwards I stumble into a fight with two of the grand guard. I race into a nearby tenement to escape, but they follow me in.

I deflect blades and bullets with my sword as I backpedal up the stairs, trying to focus the Heart on the officer at the front. "They place bets, he and the other

guards, on which prisoner will cry first." Hardly person of the year material, but not one who deserves to die by my hand. I counter his attack and grapple him, trying to choke him out as the second guard closes in. The officer is between us, but the guard raises his sword anyway.

Don't do it.

He swipes, cutting clean through the officer's leg, who crumples and dies. Aghast at what he's done, the other guard flees the scene, while I'm left standing on the stairs with the corpse of a man I didn't want dead.

Great. Just perfect. This is exactly the kind of scenario I'm trying to avoid. I leave the tenement, trying to get my head straight. But the guard who fled has apparently had time to think about how he just ran through his own superior, and has evidently decided that it was all my fault, and comes after me again.

After what just happened, I don't want to mess about, so I Blink onto a first-floor balcony. Taking very careful aim, I shoot the guard with a sleep dart. But he's still running as the toxin takes hold, and he topples over a railing, landing hard on the cobbles running along the canal. Oh no.

I blink down to street level and rush over to where he lies sprawled, dead as a doornail.

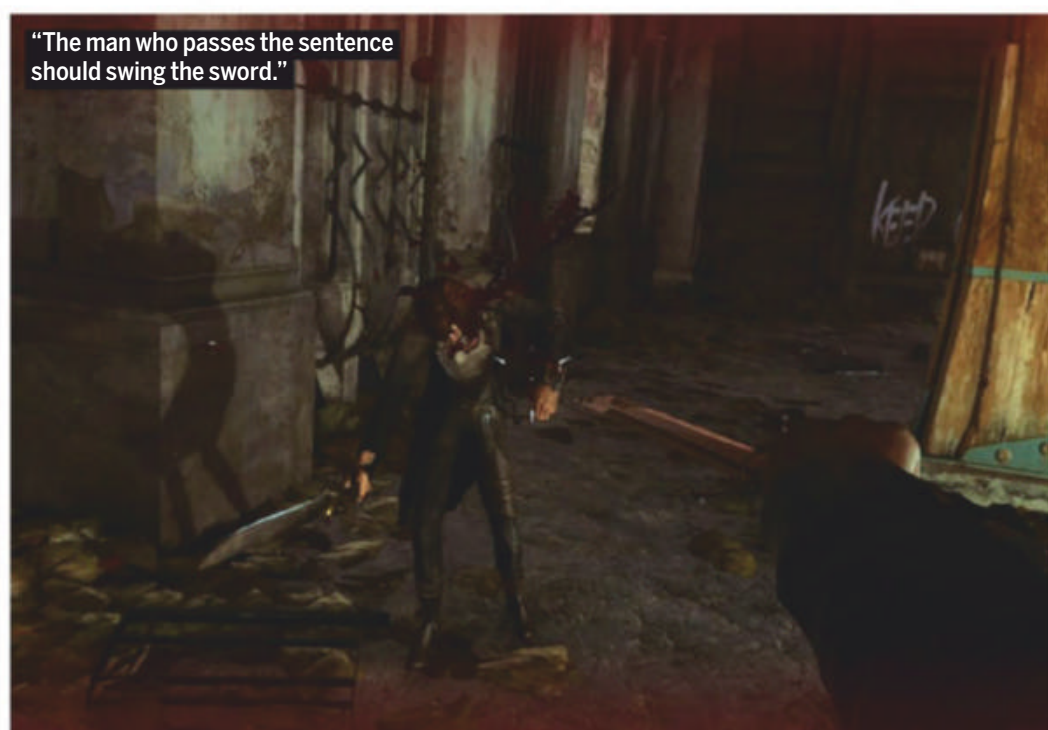
Civilians are screaming now, so I don't have time to process this monumental fuck up. I cut down an alley and make haste to the carriage station. I decide to head straight there and

resume my judgements in the next area, but I at least focus the Heart on the people I pass, and mercifully it comes up with nothing too egregious.

As I turn into the square behind the carriage station, however, I'm immediately set upon by a group of Howlers – Karnaca's meanest gang. Simply being Howlers puts them in the frame for a death sentence, as does the fact that they've attacked me unprovoked. But after what's just happened, I really don't want to kill more people than necessary, so I do the best I can to avoid lethal force. At the end, two Howlers are dead, and three are unconscious. I'll take it.

I hop in the carriage to Upper Aventa, which I need to navigate before heading to the mansion. I also use the

"HE KNEW HAGFISH WAS NOT A FIT FOOD FOR THE CHILD. ALL THOSE LITTLE BONES"





HOW THE HEART WORKS

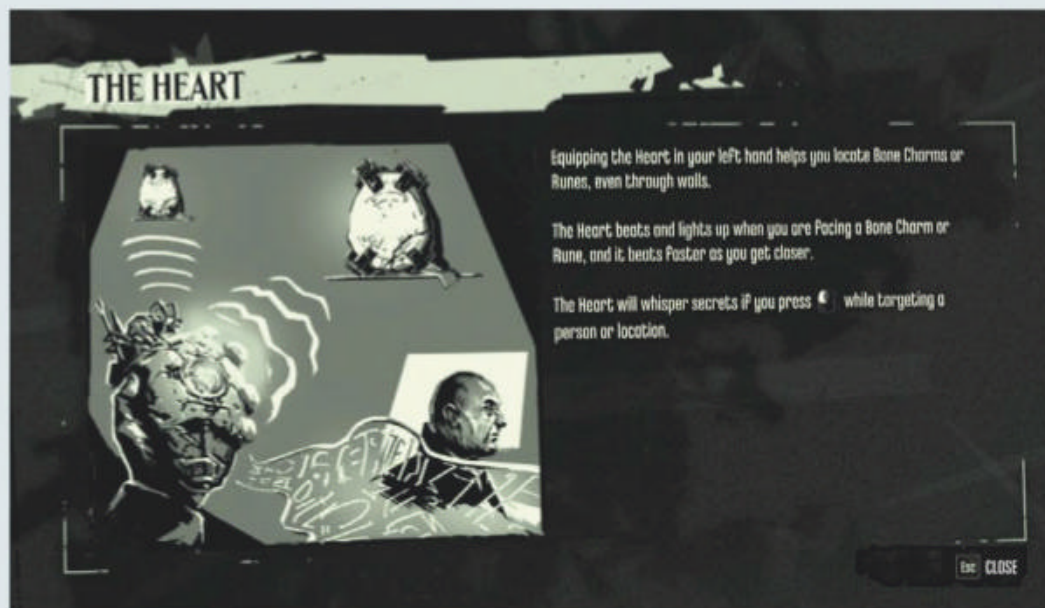
Dishonored's Heart is a fascinating world-building tool. Here's how it works:

1 SOCIAL STRUCTURE
NPCs are divided into different classes, guards, civilians, witches etc.

2 RELEVANCE
When the player points the heart at a character, it plays a random phrase from the appropriate class.

3 UNIQUENESS
It then checks off that NPC, so it won't play two phrases for a character.

4 GENERALITIES
If the heart is pressed without pointing it at an NPC, it instead provides a more general phrase about the world.



» Heart to scan for any murky souls lurking around. One guard stood by a wall of light, “Killed his neighbour’s dog [and] sold the meat to a cook on a merchant ship.” So I pop his head from a distance with a dart.

Another, “Locked a squaddie in a blood-fly infested apartment out of jealousy.” The Heart even specifies this poor squaddie, “Died a horrible death,” so I walk this guard to a quiet spot using possession, then plant a spring razor on his back.

Feeling a little more reassured, I cross the gorge that separates Upper Aventa from the Clockwork Mansion, and enter Jindosh’s whirring labyrinth. I stick to, as Corvo puts it “the space between the walls” as much as possible, trying to avoid the bladed hulk of the prowling Clockwork Soldiers. Inevitably though, I have to creep out to deal with a particularly unpleasant guard. “They won’t let him back into the bathhouse,” the heart says. “Not after what he did to a boy there.” Barf.

I sneak out to shank the guard, but I’ve failed to notice a sleeping Clockwork nestled in the wall, which promptly stirs. I have enough time to do the deed, but then the Clockwork is on me. I blink away, spin around, and shoot the Clockwork’s head off with my pistol, which stops it from being able to hunt me.

It’s the slickest move I’ve made all day, but unfortunately it sends the Clockwork haywire, while the gunshot attracts the attention of several other guards.

I watch in horror at the storm of blades and blood that unfolds. I can’t get close without being attacked from half a dozen angles, so I try to take out the Clockwork with bolts and bullets. It’s like shooting peas at a tank, and it’s only when the Clockwork has minced all three guards that I finally manage to destroy it.

How many of them deserved to die? How many didn’t? I’ll never know. What a mess. The only good thing about this calamity is it’s given me an idea of a way to deal with Jindosh. I find my way to his laboratory, where the inventor is protected by two Clockworks.

There’s no way for guards to get in here, so I deliberately attract the attention of one, and swiftly decapitate it. I then draw the second one away while the headless Clockwork makes short work of its master.

Job done, I quickly locate Sokolov, and grab him from his prison. As I’m leaving, a cluster of guards appear from the elevator and spot me.

I’m not trying to fight them with a pensioner on my shoulder, so I dash back to Jindosh’s lab, and use the walkway across the gorge to escape the mansion.

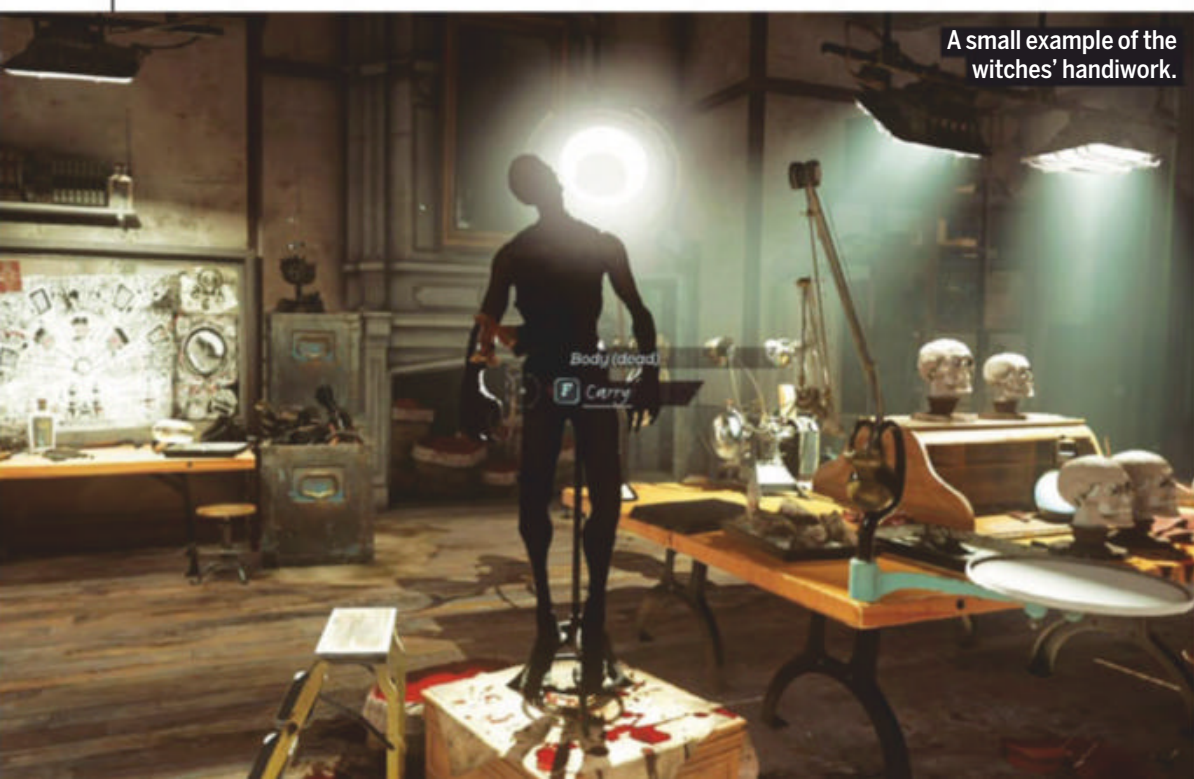
SUFFERING WITCHES

I leave Aventa with 13 people dead, almost half of them accidental. This is a disaster, about as far away from clockwork as you can get. As night falls, and I depart for my next target, my overriding feeling is “must try harder”.

Tonight I have an appointment with the curator of the Royal Conservatory, Breanna Ashworth. We’re going to have a sharp discussion about preserving items of questionable value, namely her life. I’m also going to keep my eyes peeled for more general rotten apples, but I need to be strict now more than ever.

Problem is, this is very difficult when the whole damn orchard seems to be festering. Once again, my first targets sets the tone. “He pushed her hard against the machinery. She lost the child,” the heart says. Grim, grim, grim. I possess the guilty dockworker and walk him up the street a little, then snuff him out with a bolt. Further up the street, a female guard killed a woman wearing “a blue dress with butter roses”, while her male squaddie killed two people and made it look like “a lover’s quarrel”. A well placed spring razor deals with them both.

I try to be careful, precise, thinking every movement through, but it never seems to be enough. I’m too slow to





Ashworth goes back to the ashes.

stop a grand guard officer pushing a servant girl off a roof. I give the poor wretch the best justice I can, but it feels hollow. In an alley near the district's black market, I bump into another group of Howlers. I manage to take them out non-lethally, yet as I walk away I hear a crunching sound. I turn to find a swarm of rats devouring one of the unconscious Howlers. I kill the rats before they can move on to the main course, but the starter is well and truly consumed.

By the time I enter the conservatory, my mood has turned black, and unlike when I arrived at Addermire, *Dishonored II* provides no ray of hope.

Quite the opposite really, as the conservatory is overrun by Empress Delilah's coven of witches.

In a world that is filled with nasty people, the witches still manage to stand out. They kill for fun and use magic to torture their victims in truly horrific ways. This isn't

abstract lore, either; evidence of their depravity litters the conservatory. There are bodies everywhere, sprawled on the floor and dangling from the ceiling.

IN ONE ROOM, I FIND A CORPSE PIN-CUSHIONED BY SLEEP DARTS

In one room, I find a corpse pin-cushioned by sleep darts. In another, a literal pile of dead half-charred from a clear attempt to burn them.

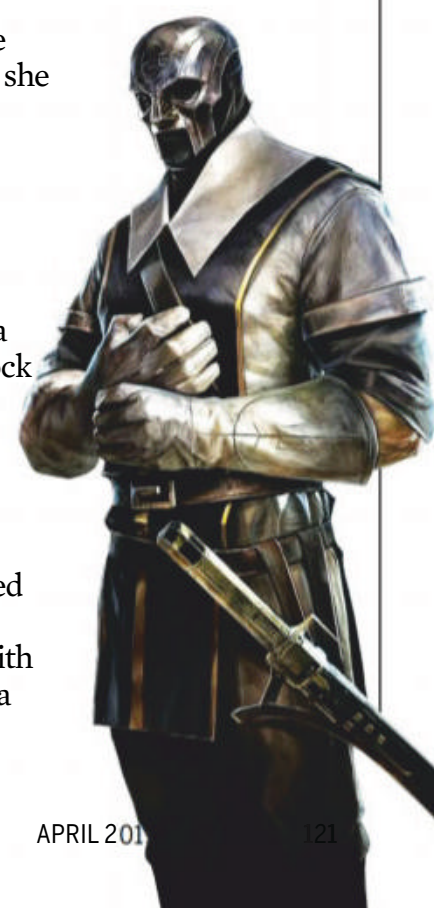
It's at this point I decide to break my own rules. There's no point looking for guilt here. I'm surrounded by it.

It literally paints the walls. Instead, I'm going to look for innocence, and if I don't find it, then to hell with them all.

I set the heart to work, only now with a different objective. As I suspected, it comes up with little in the way of redemptive insight. I let one witch go because she "struggles to hold on to who she was" while another "misses the younger brothers she left behind". Small hope for change, but at least it's some hope.

The rest, though? Ugh. I stalk through the halls, no longer even trying to sneak, fighting and killing almost every witch I come across. I run out of spring razors halfway through the level. At one point I spot a witch stood on the statue of a turtle, performing a mock scene of Delilah's usurpation of Emily. The Heart whispers, "Her spirit is as black and distorted as the void. She takes delight in slaughter." She burns.

In the end, I leave the conservatory with 22 more souls on my list, most of them witches. Ashworth is somewhere amongst them, shot in the head as I carved my way through her underlings. It's going to take a miracle to avoid High Chaos now, but at this point, with everything I've seen, I'm struggling to believe Karnaca is even worth saving. ■





REINSTALL

OLD GAMES, NEW PERSPECTIVES

The Nazis have taken a special interest in the Atlantis myth



You have to trade junk with this merchant.



INDIANA JONES AND THE FATE OF ATLANTIS

A real adventure game. *By Andy Kelly*

Few adventure games actually feature much *adventure*. It's a curious name for this, the most languid and cerebral of genres. But *Indiana Jones and the Fate of Atlantis* is a rare exception. Like the movies that inspired it – and the adventure serials that inspired *them* – it's an exciting adventure in the truest sense. And it's remarkable how they managed to squeeze this much energy out of a pretty standard point-and-click adventure game.

The myth at the heart of this original *Indiana Jones* story is, as the title

suggests, the fabled lost city of Atlantis. In 1939, on the eve of World War II, Indy finds a mysterious Atlantean artefact in the vast, unorganised collection of the college he teaches at between expeditions. The discovery of the object serves as the game's comical prologue, where a bumbling Indy stumbles through the college archives and leaves a trail of destruction behind him.

But, as if often the case at the beginning of an *Indiana Jones* story, the artefact is cruelly snatched away from him by Klaus Kerner, a pistol-wielding agent of the Third Reich. The Nazis have taken a special interest in the Atlantis myth, in

particular a mystery metal called orichalcum that is said to generate an incredible amount of energy – energy the Nazis want to turn into a nuclear weapon. And so Indy embarks on a dangerous quest to stop them, because as we know from *The Last Crusade*, he really hates Nazis.

IQ TEST

Despite coming out well before some of LucasArts' most famous games, *Fate of Atlantis* is one of the most innovative point-and-click adventures it ever released. There's the IQ scoring system, which awards you bonus points if your solution to a puzzle is particularly imaginative. And some of the puzzle solutions are randomised too, making the game surprisingly replayable. But my favourite feature, which also adds to its replayability, is how the game is split into three distinctly flavoured paths: Fists, Wits, and Team.

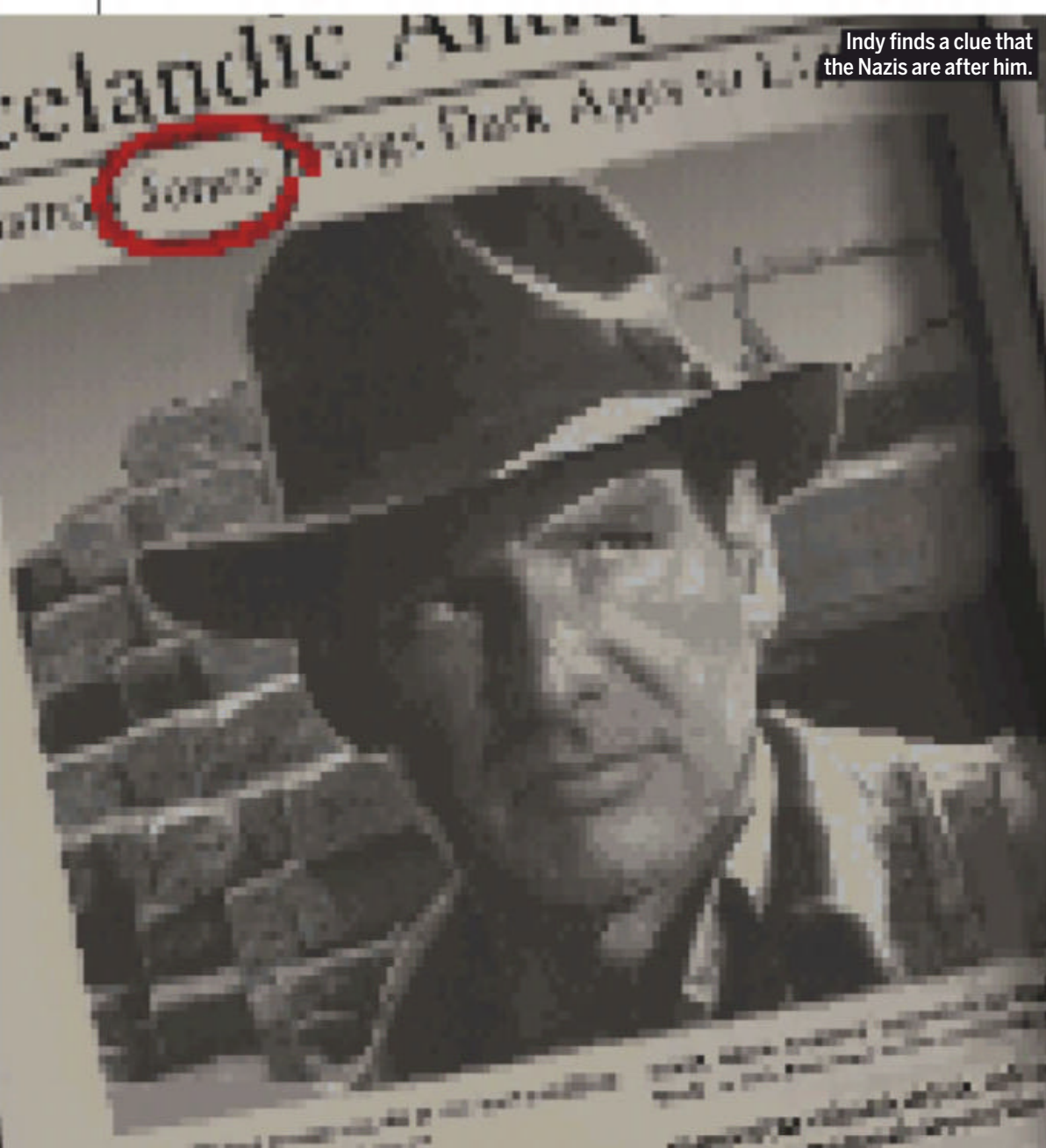
NEED TO KNOW

RELEASED
1992

DEVELOPER
LucasArts

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
bit.ly/fateatlantis



Early in the game Indy teams up with Sophia Hapgood, a self-professed psychic medium who claims to be in contact with the spirit of an Atlantean king. The pair were romantically involved once upon a time, and their relationship is similar to those of his female companions in the movies – more playful and sarcastic than romantic. Sophia has definite echoes of Marion Ravenwood. She's tough, resourceful, and quick-witted, regularly putting Indy in his place. It's refreshing (and surprising) to see a strong female character like this in a game, especially one from the early 1990s.

If you choose the Team path you'll spend the rest of the game with Sophia, solving puzzles together, trading barbs, and occasionally taking control of her. For me this is the most enjoyable way to play the game, simply because the interactions between the two characters are so much fun. The dialogue is sharp and funny and some of the puzzles involving both characters are well designed. But if you'd prefer to go solo, the Wits path sees Indy chasing Atlantis on his own, with trickier puzzles and, of course, less dialogue.

You'll visit many of the same locations in both paths, but they feel quite different.

One of the most entertaining puzzles is found on the Team path, where Indy and Sophia try to steal an artefact from a snooty French professor by staging a séance. While Sophia conjures up the spirit of her Atlantean king, Indy combines a bedsheet, a flashlight, and a creepy mask to scare the professor out of the room, leaving the object behind. Meanwhile, on the Fists or Wits paths, you get involved in a car chase with some Nazis to retrieve the item.

That's more exciting, granted, but the séance is a great character moment.

Then, finally, there's the more action-focused Fists path, which is the one I would avoid – if only because it forces you to endure the game's abysmal fighting minigames more often. While the opportunity to punch Nazis in a game is always welcome, actually beating someone up in *Fate of Atlantis* is a chore. You use a combination of key presses and mouse clicks to block and strike at different angles, but enemies are difficult to read and the controls just feel clunky and unsatisfying.

ANCIENT HISTORY *Other games starring Indiana Jones*



INDIANA JONES & THE TEMPLE OF DOOM

Based on the second film this sees Indy battling cultists, riding minecarts, and using his whip.



INDIANA JONES AND THE LAST CRUSADE

Indy's first point-and-click outing. Not as good as *Fate of Atlantis*, but still a decent adventure game.



INDIANA JONES & THE INFERNAL MACHINE

The first 3D instalment in the series, inspired by the wildly successful *Tomb Raider* series.



INDIANA JONES & THE EMPEROR'S TOMB

An action game with puzzles and punchy melee combat that really makes you feel like Indy.



THE CHARACTER ANIMATION IS WONDERFULLY LIVELY AND EXPRESSIVE TOO

However, some fights *can* be bypassed by solving puzzles, which in turn earns you more IQ points.

ADVENTURE TIME

One of the game's greatest strengths is capturing the pulpy adventure feel of the films, but within the fairly rigid confines of a 1990s point-and-click adventure. One of the ways it does this is by never lingering in one location for too long. In the first couple of hours you'll have visited New York City, Monte Carlo, Iceland, Guatemala, and the Azores. The changing scenery makes for an energetic, fast-paced game, helped by the dynamic iMuse soundtrack, which deftly incorporates John Williams' iconic score.

It looks fantastic too. The art is pretty low resolution by modern standards, and even compared to other LucasArts adventures released only a few years later. But each



country Indy visits has a rich and distinctive atmosphere, tied together by a tastefully understated colour palette. Whether you're exploring the frozen, overcast plains of Iceland, a bustling Algerian marketplace, or a Nazi U-boat, every location is rich with detail and personality. The character animation is wonderfully lively and expressive too, perfectly capturing the scrappy, rough and tumble action of Spielberg's movies.

But there are times when the game slips hopelessly into 1990s adventure game absurdity, which dampens the feeling of being Indiana Jones somewhat. One puzzle involves peeling some chewed gum off a school desk then sticking it to the bottoms of your shoes. Why? To walk up a coal chute, of course. I tried to imagine Indy doing this in the movies, but my brain simply couldn't process it. But for the most part the puzzles are pretty logical and in keeping with the tone of the source material, particularly the ones involving activating ancient, arcane mechanisms and other such archaeological antics.

As well as the aforementioned fighting system, there are some other,

equally as maddening minigames. One involves flying over the desert in a balloon that is an absolute nightmare to control, and if I never have to play that part again in my life I'll be happy. Luckily these are used quite sparingly and most of the game is in the classic adventure game mould: exploring, talking to people, combining items, and so on. This is about as vintage as point-and-click games get, with the classic verb buffet taking up half the screen, and an inventory that's constantly filled with seemingly useless items.

Fate of Atlantis is easy to get running on modern PCs thanks to its availability on digital platforms such as Steam and GOG. Just make sure you hit Alt+S when you start the game on Steam to disable the pixel smoothing filter, which is enabled by default. If you're into adventure games you absolutely should play this. The randomised elements, IQ system, and multiple paths through the story set it apart from more straightforward adventure games of the era. The story and characters are engaging, the music is superb, it's brilliantly paced, and it's better than *Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*.



NOCLIP MODE

One of the most consistently useful console commands in PC gaming. *By Andy Kelly*



RIGHT: This is what the bathysphere introduction in *BioShock* looks like from above. Pretty.



In the summer of 1999 I bought a copy of *SiN*, a first-person shooter by Ritual Entertainment that featured a preposterous hero named John Blade and some brilliantly dynamic, interactive environments. It was released a month before *Half-Life*, and thus was completely overshadowed, but Ritual did a lot of stuff Valve did in its game – and better. I loved it, at least until I reached a level set in some kind of underwater facility. I remember a lot of swimming, some frustrating enemies, and a labyrinth of boring corridors.

And, being a lot more impatient in my teenage years, I decided to bypass the entire level by activating noclip mode. Noclip, as PC gamers of a certain age will know, is a console command that lets you fly around the level, passing through walls and ceilings. The term was popularised by id Software, its first-person shooters often featured a noclip mode – as well as many games built on the *Quake* engine including *Half-Life* and, yes, *SiN*.

Teenage me was delighted, because I was able to breeze through that stupid underwater level. There was an undeniable feeling of guilt, a lurking sense that I was cheating the game – and myself. But over the years, in those glorious early days of PC gaming, I used noclip regularly in a lot of different games to get past sections I couldn't be bothered with or that were too hard. I figured if the developer put it in there, surely I should be allowed to use it?

BUG REPORT

I don't use noclip to cheat these days, but it's still, often, a very useful console command. In buggy games where progress can be halted by, say, a door or set-piece not triggering, it's invaluable. More than once I've used the *tcl* (short for 'toggle collision') command in Bethesda RPGs such as *Fallout* and *Skyrim* to bypass broken sections of a level. An inelegant

COMMAND AND CONQUER *Other legendary console commands*



GOD

It's called a 'console command' but let's be honest, it's a straight-up cheat, and I admit to using it many times in the past.



IMPULSE 255

If god mode feels a little too cheaty, but you're still stuck in the original *Quake*, this command will grant you quad damage.



NOTARGET

Another FPS classic. This makes you invisible to enemies, letting you saunter through a level totally unhindered.



DNUNLOCK

A console command from *Duke Nukem 3D*. Type this in and every locked door and the force field in the level will magically open.

solution, and I really shouldn't have to in the first place, but at least we have the option, unlike console players who can end up stuck.

But my favourite use for noclip is peeking behind the Wizard of Oz's curtain. I spend a lot of time exploring videogame environments, taking screenshots, making videos, and generally admiring the art. It's a part of game design that has always fascinated me. Which is why, when a game has a noclip mode, I always take the opportunity to escape the bounds of the level and get an idea of how it was built. Even if a game doesn't have a noclip command, it's usually possible to hack one in using a tool such as Cheat Engine.

One of the first times I did this was in the original *BioShock*. Its equivalent of noclip is using the *ghost* and *fly* commands, and doing so gives you a fascinating glimpse at how Irrational built the stricken city of Rapture. During the opening bathysphere descent I flew out of the pod, soaring above the entire sequence, getting a bird's eye view of it. And it was surprisingly beautiful, even when viewed from angles a player was never meant to see.

And it was possible to see how the developers had pieced it together. That whale that swims by waits patiently off-screen until the bathysphere passes it, like an actor waiting for their cue to go on stage. The amazing Rapture skyline, with its blinking neon signs, is mostly just flat images. You'd never know in the

bathysphere, of course. But when you get up close, it's like one of those towns in an old western where the buildings are all thin plywood facades. This does ruin the magic somewhat, but even knowing the truth, that sequence still gives me goose bumps every time I play it.

Recently I used a camera hack to access a noclip mode in *Hitman 2*. I already knew IO Interactive had some of the best environment designers in the business, but being able to move around those levels freely made me appreciate their

I ALWAYS TAKE THE OPPORTUNITY TO ESCAPE THE BOUNDS OF THE LEVEL

talent even more. I don't know how developers feel about people poking around like this, and I'm sure some of them are mortified by people seeing assets that were only ever meant to be seen from afar up close. In any game with a large, distant group of people – the crowd in a racing game, perhaps – noclip lets you see the ugly truth. Weird, polygonal mutants that were only ever designed to give the suggestion of a person from far away, who you half expect to say "Kill me!" in a mournful voice. But for me it's a way to appreciate their work on a deeper level. And if I ever replay *SiN*, I'll be using noclip to skip that damn underwater level again. ■



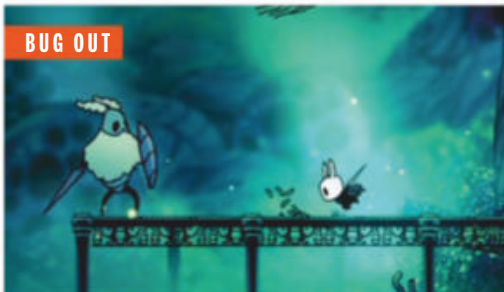
RIGHT: Using noclip in *Metro* lets you see the ruins of Moscow without the gas mask obscuring your vision.



PHILIPPA
WARR

In the words of '90s ab aficionado Peter Andre, "Yesterday's history, tomorrow's a mystery, today is a gift - that's why we call it the present." I'm so glad that I've forgotten all of my mathematics higher education and yet this nugget remains.

BUG OUT

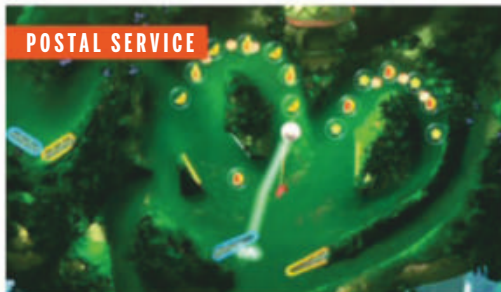


HOLLOW KNIGHT

www.hollowknight.com

→ I'm bad at *Hollow Knight*. Actively terrible at it, in fact. But I still go back time and time again because its underground bugscape is so eerily beautiful. *Hollow Knight 2* has now been announced, so perhaps that's the impetus I need to finally get to the end. And if not, it'll be more stunning locations and foes to enjoy as I die.

POSTAL SERVICE



YOKU'S ISLAND EXPRESS

www.yokugame.com

→ Dung beetles are amazing creatures. Not only can some of them roll 1,141 times their own body weight or find their way at night using the Milky Way for guidance, but one dung beetle is enjoying a successful career as a postal worker on a pinball-themed island. They truly are magnificent creatures.

BRING A BUCKET



VISCERA CLEANUP DETAIL

www.runestorm.com/viscera

→ Oh sure. You go be a hero. Destroy the invading aliens or blast apart the science wing. No, no. It's fine. I'm sure it's all very important. But who do you think cleans up after you? That's right, it's muggins here. You're just lucky that I happen to like throwing bleeding mandibles into furnaces. Just mind that bucket!

ALCHEMICAL REACTION



OPUS MAGNUM

www.zachtronics.com/opus-magnum

→ Do you know the quickest way to find a more efficient solution to one of *Opus Magnum*'s alchemy-themed puzzles? Post a gif of your solution online and wait. You will immediately find out what you did wrong whether you like it or not. Whether you learn from that feedback or throw the internet in the bin is up to you.

MUST
PLAY

A PERSONAL LIST
OF THE BEST
GAMES YOU CAN
PLAY RIGHT NOW

by Philippa Warr

GAME OF HEARTS



REGENCY SOLITAIRE

www.greayaliengames.com/regencysolitaire

→ A Jane Austen-inspired tale of love and finance told through the medium of playing cards. It happens to play out across three of the UK games press' strongholds – Bath, Brighton and London – but luckily it's set in a time before games journalism even existed. Unless Jane Austen was secretly penning *Dark Souls* reviews.

CHOO CHOO

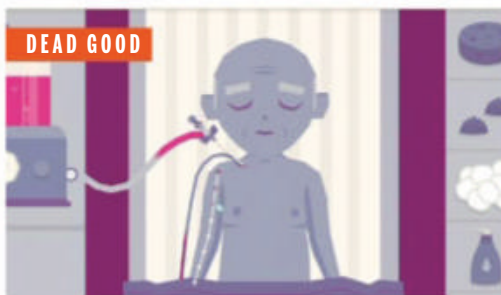


DARK TRAIN

www.paperash.com

→ A mechanical squid tethered to a steam train must make its way through a papercraft world. Frustrating at times due to the absence of hints or clear directions, but the unique visuals make it an experience well worth persevering with and puzzling over. I haven't taken my own advice and am stuck.

DEAD GOOD



A MORTICIAN'S TALE

www.laundrybear.com/a-morticians-tale

→ *A Mortician's Tale* takes the form of those free browser "perform an operation on a Disney princess" games, but what it does with that setup is explain how being a mortician works. It demystifies preparing a body for burial and offers up a perspective on the current state of the western funeral industry.

ON RAILS



COSMIC EXPRESS

www.cosmicexpressgame.com

→ Do you look at the state of the rail service in this country and think "I could do better?". I have no idea. But while you wait for your overpriced, late and crowded train you can puzzle over *Cosmic Express*. Lay tracks to allow the train to pick up and drop off commuters, and bask in space's lack of high-speed debates.



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IT'S ALL OVER...

WAYS TO READ PC GAMER

Inspired by EA's sensible and easy-to-use Anthem access chart, we have decided to use the same format for PC Gamer publication dates. You're welcome.

	MARCH 29, 2019	APRIL 4, 2019	FIVE YEARS HENCE -ISH	NO	DON'T YOU BLOODY DARE.
I SUBSCRIBE TO THE MAGAZINE	✓	×	×	×	×
I BUY PCG AT THE SHOPS	×	✓	×	×	×
I READ DONATED COPIES FIVE YEARS HENCE IN MY DOCTOR'S WAITING ROOM	×	×	✓	×	×
IS PCG ON ORIGIN?	×	×	×	✓	×
COULD I THEORETICALLY GET SOME OF THIS #CONTENT EARLY ON PCGAMER.COM?	×	×	×	×	✓

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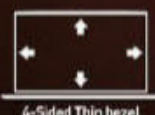
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